

## Dr. Chris Lindgren

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## Overview

Rhetoricians still seem to be coping with how to study and theorize the rhetorical relationship between people and technologies. The ancient art of rhetoric was originally developed within a particular city-state and focuses on the use of speech. In this class, I am challenging us to consider how we dwell in a very different *polis* (city-state): a place where businesses and governments have invested in a global infrastructure of networked databases that perform operations with textual user-data.\* Such a communication infrastructure reconfigures the relationships between people and their use of tools and language. Consider some of the following differences between speech communication and contemporary communication mediated by digital and computational technologies:

- Since different people are delivered different content with the same applications, can an interface or device be analyzed with concepts derived about speech interactions or the study of texts?
- How about the creation, maintenance, and revision of networked databases or machine-learning algorithms that such devices employ?

In response to these questions, we will survey, interrogate, and apply developing bodies of rhetorical approaches to theorizing the rhetorics of technology that integrate with the linguistic-textual. Our shared main aim involves understanding how traditionally theorized and practiced rhetorics should be intertwined with the study of our everyday, digital practices that are linked to user-data. What can be learned about such an infrastructure, when we realize that user-data are not discretely confined to singular purposes, but multiple and rhetorical? Let's put this fact about user-data into some recent situations:

- Recently, [Netflix trolled 54 of their users](#) who watched a particular movie everyday for 2 weeks ([Wittmer, 2017](#)). Whether or not Netflix made this information up, how are data being analyzed in unregulated ways at Netflix or any other networked application (*cf.* [Uber](#)<sup>1,2</sup>, [Tinder](#), etc.)?
- Facebook has been investing and accepting money from businesses<sup>1,2</sup> and politicians<sup>1,2</sup> to develop tailor-made psychographically curated audiences to target fine-grained audiences for sometimes unethical purposes.
- Facebook and Twitter enable politicians the ability to [block citizens](#) from their pages and accounts.
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) plans to [advance social media surveillance strategies](#).
- Hundreds of thousands of American identities were stolen and used to spam the latest FCC Net Neutrality commenting site with pro-repeal opinions ([Kao, 2017](#)).

I am asking us all to take a step back, pause, and consider the following important question: **How can and should we, as rhetoricians, study such a digital infrastructure with very different metes and bounds than those of rhetoric's origins in ancient Athens?**

I suggest that we start by reflecting on our own position within this rhetorical landscape. By better understanding our own relationship with our everyday digital, networked technologies, we can ask better questions, develop better methodologies, and produce more substantive rhetorical theories for our time. To accomplish this goal, we will examine rhetorical and STS theories that have been and have yet to be integrated with that of mediation, activity, feminist, queer, and race. Graded projects will include weekly annotations during the first half of the course, as a method to prime our class discussions. Additionally, the annotations will help each student work toward the construction of their own rhetorical methodology. In the second half of the course, students will apply these methodologies in a small-scale autoethnography about their own rhetorical experiences with a networked technology. Students will come away from the course with the following: 1) foundational knowledge about emerging methodologies in rhetorics of technology, 2) a pilot of their own methodology, and 3) preliminary insights about their own rhetorical

experiences with a networked technology. *PhD students will also be required to articulate implications that their projects have for rhetoric by writing about their methodology and preliminary findings.*

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\*Check out your own personal archive of user-data that Google has been collecting about you via their [Takeout](#) service.

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## Objectives

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- Survey contemporary interdisciplinary research on rhetorics and technology.
- Be able to describe particular lines of inquiry within the diverse fields of rhetoric and technology.
- Formulate a research problem and methodology about a particular technological issue.
- Propose, conduct, and write up preliminary findings derived from your research study, which also poses implications for a particular field in rhetoric.
- Manage and organize qualitative data (fieldnotes / memos).
- Learn and apply basic grounded analysis techniques.

## Metalogue: Explaining the format of the course

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I've designed this course in a manner that can be summed up as the 2 following phases:

1. Communal introductory survey
2. Independent investigations

The first phase offers us a the opportunity to survey scholarship from a variety of subfields in a condensed and intensive environment. This phase serves as an abridged, introductory means, rather than comprehensive or even foundational. For example, some readings may be foundational texts that outline frameworks for your future projects. Other readings offer us scholars who have applied foundational theories, so you can see particular problems and approaches to studying those problems.

The second phase of the course provides us time to independently dig deeper into one of those subfields. Based on your interests, you invent and develop a small study into a research problem that you hook into one of the subfields reviewed in the first phase of the course. This is your

opportunity to apply your developing scholarly skills of primary and secondary research with the intent to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation.

Overall, this approach to the course is akin to the idea of discovering a contemporary band that you love and subsequently digging into their historical roots. Building on this analogy, you are also an up-and-coming musician, who carves out new creative pathways.

### **How 5674 differs from a methods course**

ENGL 5674 differs from traditional methods courses in that the latter type surveys a variety of **methods**, rather than focusing on just one. Additionally, in methods courses, students typically must dig deeper into methods of their own particular interest. In this course, I ask you to learn autoethnographic methods for the specific objectives outlined in the next section.