

The Information Society, Spring 2018

RTF 331N and AMS 325

T Th 9:30-11:00, BMC 4.204

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Course Overview

This course provides an overview of the forces shaping many of the communication and information practices that together have come to be called the Information Society. It also provides an environment in which you can formulate research questions and work with a small group on answers and approaches to your questions. In this sense, the course has an exploratory angle to it, one that you can direct.

Although I originated this course and have taught it in different ways at different times, I believe there are some very pressing issues around information and “datafication” that require new attention now. I intend to provide you with some background literature and exposure to various perspectives on these issues. Alongside this, there will be opportunities for you to undertake original inquiries in small groups to generate additional data, information and insights. There is an explosion of interest in many of these questions - think of the Facebook/Cambridge Analytical scandal, of the availability of citizen video in police altercations as well as citizen altercations (think ‘BBQ While Black’) that have shed light on racist behaviors. The arrival of subtle sensors in our physical environment have led some to claim we are becoming a surveillance state. In the meantime, many people happily avail themselves of the growing number of media systems (think Netflix) integrated into our lives that seamlessly recommend, process requests and searches and deliver valuable services even as they log our transactions into large, shareable databases.

So, what will we do? First, we will investigate political, economic, technological and social changes that established the groundwork for various dramatic shifts in the tools we use, the quality and pace of work and leisure, the way we communicate with each other and conduct our lives. We particularly examine some technological challenges posed by “datafication.” In the US, public policy typically lags technological change, but it maintains a role in shaping the outcomes associated with technologies. Some of the contemporary problems associated with privacy and recent data breaches will be among those we will examine in terms of policy responses as well as individual responses.

How work has changed is essential to both the definition of the Information Society and our expectations for how the economy will function in the future. As well there are increasing instances of cities and countries striving to become “Information Cities” or “Smart Cities” or “Information Societies” in very deliberate fashion, and many of their goals have to do with what sort of work force and resources they cultivate locally. Finally, there are numerous questions associated with building the physical and human “infrastructure” implicit in the Information

Society. Your work in this course will grapple with some of the contemporary policy debates regarding infrastructure alongside these other topics.

Overall, our goals in this course will be to (1) understand definitions of the Information Society and their implications; (2) survey the key forces driving the Information Society and understand why they are transformative; (3) identify and explain the data-associated economic and policy shifts and outcomes associated with the Information Society; and (4) assess and evaluate some of the cultural, social, ethical and economic tensions associated with these trends.

Course Requirements

Most of the course readings will be available in a required course packet from Jenn's Copies or online. We will use our Canvas site for assignments, grading, and basic communication. Please make sure your email is available to Canvas. While most reading materials will be found in the reading packet or on the course site, some additional web-based readings may be assigned to you during the course or other copies of articles provided to you in class. Since this is a relatively small class, **please come to class having completed the readings** assigned for that week and be prepared to discuss them.

I will adjust readings periodically depending on the research projects you design. There is a lot of material, much of it very new, on the topics noted earlier. I plan to work with you in the first few weeks of the class to identify your group research interests and to assign readings based on your interests. That said, I have developed a loose structure around some elements of the Information Society that should interest us.

Here's what I envision your role to be:

1. You will be asked to submit responses to discussion questions in forums on the site and to post responses to others' work. You may receive some assignments that require you to present your responses either individually or in a small group to the rest of the class. You also will be required to pose some questions to the class, primarily around readings.
2. You will subscribe, at least for the semester, to the Benton Foundation Headlines listserv for communication topics. This is available at <https://www.benton.org/headlines>. The service is a very digestible headline service that you can scan quickly, with links to topics so that you can read additional material as you wish. It will provide you with contemporary news on events and developments related to the subject matter of the course.
3. The class is discussion-based, with some lecture. Since you are expected to participate, you are expected to attend class. More than three unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.
4. About mid-way through the class, you will write a summary of a book that you have read on a topic related to the course. I will provide a list from which you can choose.

5. You will be working with a small (2-3 people) research group. Your group **must** meet with me on at least two occasions to plan your work and to get my advice and feedback on your progress. Your research will unfold as a proposal, a brief presentation to the class, a final presentation to the class, and a final piece of work submitted to me. The work itself may be a written paper, a project of some sort, or something else. You can be creative here! You are also expected to provide constructive feedback on other groups' projects, and to attend all final presentations.

6. You must attend at least two "outside" talks on a topic related to the course material. There are many, many talks around UT – and in Austin - and several in Moody in particular, that will be related to the subject matter we address this semester. You will write a short (one page) summary of the talk and your responses to it. These should be posted on the appropriate discussion forum on canvas.

7. You will complete a peer evaluation assessing the members of your work group and your own performance during the term.

The research projects plus your report on a book will comprise the major writing assignments, in addition to some smaller assignments (including the summary of talks, etc.).

The specific writing assignments will be posted on the course site. Since this is a writing intensive course, you will receive feedback on your written work and also engage in some peer review. The short papers will be evaluated in terms of written content, style, grammar and spelling, and format. There will be opportunities to submit drafts of your research paper for preliminary feedback, and there also will be opportunities to submit rewritten work, albeit within strict time limitations (2 days). Please note the statements below regarding help from the Writing Center and regarding plagiarism.

Class Etiquette

I assume you are in class because you would like to listen to people and pay attention to what is going on. Therefore, do not use your cellphones or other small electronic devices for any purpose during the time we are in class. Please either turn them off or put them on vibrate (if it is a quiet vibrate) and keep them out of sight. It is only 75 minutes without your phone!

As well, it is distracting if you are surfing the web, checking email or otherwise engaged with your laptop computer during class time. If you plan to open a laptop in the class, you must sit in the first row of the room near the instructor and use it only for course-related work. This policy may be rescinded if it does not function well.

Grading

Final grades will be based on the following:

	<u>%</u>
Class participation + attendance	10
Short forum posts in response to questions, etc.	10
Book Report (individual)	25
Research group work	
Proposal (written)	5
meetings with me (2);	10 (5 each)
presentation to class about research ideas	10
final presentation to the class	10
final submission	15
Attending outside talks	<u>5</u>
TOTAL	100%

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Reading	Activity/Notes
	Defining an Information Society		
Week 1 1/22	<p>Introduction to the course (Discuss syllabus, goals, assignments, and requirements of the course)</p> <p>Comparing the agricultural and industrial revolutions to the 'Information revolution'</p>	<p>Manuel Castells, An Introduction to the Information Age, 138-149, in <i>The Information Society Reader</i></p> <p>Recommended: Daniel Bell, pp. 500-515.</p>	<p>Personal quick surveys</p> <p>Getting to know each other</p> <p>Discussion of research project</p>
Week 2 1/29	<p>Foundations: Structural issues of the Internet;</p> <p>The Splintering Internet: China, US, and the EU;</p> <p>Structures of Distribution</p> <p>Wireline, wireless</p>	<p>There may soon be Three Internets (<i>NYT</i>, December 2018)</p> <p>Sandvig, The Internet as the Anti-Television, 225-245, in <i>Signal Traffic</i></p> <p>Easterling, Broadband, in <i>Extrastatecraft: The power of infrastructure space</i>, 95-138.</p>	<p>(1) Research questions due on Tuesday</p> <p>(2) Discussion of research questions on Thursday</p> <p>Talk from Sam Woolley on</p>

		Recommended: Charles Acland, Consumer electronics and the building of an entertainment infrastructure, 246-265, in <i>Signal Traffic</i>	Tuesday, 1:30, LBJ Room in CMA, 5th floor
Why does Information matter?			
Week 3 2/5	Democracy What is the role of information in democracy? How does technology make a difference?	<p>Milton, J. <i>Areopagitica</i> (1644); http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica/text.html</p> <p>Schudson, M. Transparency in a transformed democracy, in 228-259, in <i>The Rise of the Right to Know</i>.</p> <p>Case: Russian Facebook ads, misinformation</p>	<p>Short paper due Thursday</p> <p>We will share recent work on FB Russian ads form 2015-2017</p>
Week 4 2/12	Democracy, cont.	<p>Benkler, Faris and Roberts, The propaganda feedback loop, in <i>Network Propaganda</i>, 75-99.</p> <p>Opportunity to investigate misinformation – hackathon,</p>	<p>Short paper due Thursday</p> <p>Kick off Friday for Misinformation session “Designing Good AI + Human Hybrid systems to curb misinformation” 10-1, PCL learning lab</p>

Week 5 2/19	How does visual information offer new opportunities to communicate? Memes, Pinterest, Instagram - Visual Dimensions: the virtual environment, the “real” environment.	Marwick, Memes, <i>Contexts</i> , 2013, 12 (4), 12-13. Shifman, The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres, <i>Journal of Visual Culture</i> , 2014, 13 (3), 340-358.	Talk from Nico Carpentier this week, Thursday Second session for “designing Good AI + Human Hybrid systems to curb misinformation,” 11-1, Friday, PCL
Week 6 2/26	Work The Gig Economy: premises and problems	What It’s like to deliver packages for Amazon. Murphy, A., <i>The Atlantic</i> , Dec. 2018 U.S. Patent example: Jones et al., Wal-Mart application, July 10, 2018	
Week 7 3/5	War, Simulation Drones and virtuality	Easterling, Stories, in <i>Extrastatecraft: The power of infrastructure space</i> , 137-161 (“War” & “Liberal”) Payne, Nintendo War 2.0, in <i>Playing War: Military video games after 9/11</i> , 35-68. Matheson and Allan, War Blogs and the War in Iraq, in <i>Digital Dynamics: Engagements and connections</i> .	Watch <i>Slaughterbots</i> in class
Week 8 3/12	Information & inequality: Definitions & Scope; Bias and discrimination; Surveillance ;	Virginia Eubanks, Automating eligibility in the heartland, in <i>Automating Inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor</i> , 39-83.	

SPRING BREAK ! this week			
Week 9 3/26	AI and Machine Learning cont.	Couldry and Powell, 2014 (July-December), Big data from the bottom up, <i>Big data & Society</i> , 1-5.	Book summaries due on Thursday
Week 10 4/2	Robots		
Week 11 4/9	Play - children & adults Privacy issues Studying Alexa and personal assistants; public and private space	Judith Shulevitz, Alexa, should we trust you? <i>Atlantic</i> , Nov. 2018 Van Dijk, Poell and De Waal, Governing a responsible platform society, in <i>The Platform Society</i> , 137-162.	Talk from Robin Mansell, London School of Economics, on Thursday, 3:30
Week 12 4/16	Privacy cont. and other issues GDPR – a model?	Examine materials at ethicalOS.org, Ethical Operating System , McGonigal and Woolley, 2018. Excerpts from the General Data Protection Regulation (in the European Union).	
Week 13 4/23	Presentations		
Week 14 4/30	Presentations		
Week 15 5/7	Wrapping up		Final project due Thursday Peer evaluations

Regarding Scholastic Dishonesty

The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. For more information on scholastic dishonesty, please visit the Student Judicial services Web site at <http://www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/sjs/>.

Undergraduate Writing Center

The Undergraduate Writing Center, located in the FAC 211, phone 471-6222, offers individualized assistance to students who want to improve their writing skills. There is no charge, and students may come in on a drop-in or appointment basis.

Services for students with disabilities <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact the Office at 471-6259 or drop by at SSB, 4th floor.

Sources (for syllabus and beyond)

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