Information in Social and Cultural Context
INF 380C
28665

Spring 2014
UTA 1.208
Mondays, 3:00pm – 6:00pm

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Course Description: Examines the role of information in human activities, particularly in relation to particular social and cultural contexts. Examines how individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and society at large create, find, use, understand, share, transform, and preserve information.

General Objectives:
Through the activities in this class we will examine the role of information in human activities, particularly how it shapes and is shaped by the social and cultural context. Students will consider how creating, finding, using, understanding, sharing, transforming, and preserving information impacts and is affected by the social and cultural contexts of individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and society at large. There is no essential piece of information or theory that every student must learn in a core class in the iSchool, but it is important that students have a general understanding of the ways in which information scholars study information and information technologies in social and cultural context.

Specific Learning Objectives:
• Learn a common language and conceptual framework that can connect the diverse areas of specialization within the information field, and express your ideas in class discussions, debates, and projects in ways that can be understood by other information professionals.
• Understand the role of information in human activities and the role of social and cultural contexts, and demonstrate your understanding through completing course readings, submitting discussion
questions via Canvas, and successful participation in small group and class discussions.

• Examine how groups, organizations, and institutions create, find, use, understand, share, transform, and curate information, and connect them to individuals on the micro side and society at large on the macro side, through completing your course readings and projects.

• Demonstrate your ability to work with others and independently effectively and professionally by successfully completing the group and individual components of the project as well as by successfully participating in small group and class discussions and working with teammates in debates, as well as maintaining professional courtesy with opponents.

Groups of three individual classes are grouped into four units

● Values and Epistemology
● Information Policy
● Information Work and Workers
● Information Institutions

Class Structure:

We will begin with a class on January 13 for which no readings are assigned; instead we will discuss the class and the topics in it and get to know what ideas we already possess about them as a class. During the following weeks the class will proceed in blocks of three classes. Each “first class” will be based on a thorough discussion of the book that students will have read before coming to class. The following two weeks' classes will be based on a discussion of sets of assigned articles. Class will convene for the scheduled 3 hours, with a break about halfway through.

All readings will be available on Canvas or online through the library, so be sure that you have established how to get to Canvas and where to look. If you should encounter difficulty accessing any of the articles, please contact our TA immediately, and NOT the day before class. The syllabus will be posted on THIS site and should be checked regularly for any changes. Any students requiring accommodation for disability or religious holy days should contact me at the beginning of class.

Class Participation:

Participation is at the core of this class. In the first class we’ll talk in detail about reading articles and participating in discussions and debates, including different useful roles that participants can take. In-class participation is absolutely required. If you have an unavoidable need for an absence you must email the instructor before class, stating why you cannot make the class and your plans for covering the material.
Weekly Readings and Posts (due 11:59p.m. on the Friday before the relevant Monday class):

Except for the first class of the term, there will be required readings for each class. The required article readings are available through modules in Canvas.

For every class you are expected to read the assigned articles carefully and post a reaction observation on the Canvas discussion board (found in that day's module), by 11:59p.m. on the Friday before each class meeting so that I have a chance to review your comments before class. These observations should address, for example, things you don't understand or that seem poorly explained or questions you feel the article(s) raises but doesn't answer, but you don't have to wait to post them until you have finished reading, and classmates may post comments to others' postings. The observations should be capable of stimulating thoughtful class discussion and will be graded accordingly. Before class, examine your colleagues' posts and be prepared to discuss them in class, whether in response to ordinary class discussion or more or less formalized debate activity.

Group Projects: Information flows in a social context:

(1) The group project for this class combines teamwork and individual creativity and accountability. It includes four parts: a project proposal, individual report, final group report, and final presentation.

(2) Early in the semester we will form teams with 4-5 students per team. The teams will work together during the semester on the project proposal, final report, and final presentation.

(3) The project proposal involves deciding on a group, organization, or institution to study, and then to articulate the social and cultural context for information and information flows within that entity. With each member focusing on a different aspect of the information life-cycle (how participants create, find, use, understand, share, transform, and preserve information), each team will submit a two-page proposal addressing the following points:

a) What group, organization, or institution have you decided to study?

b) Why have you selected this group, organization, or institution?

c) What do you expect are the social and cultural contexts for this institution?

d) What is their mission or goal?

e) On what 4-5 aspects of the information cycle will the team focus?

f) Who will focus on which component (each student picks a different one)?

g) What approach will you use across components and for each particular component?

Each team will turn in a paper copy of their project proposal in class, and will also submit their project proposal electronically via Canvas by Wednesday, February 24, 2014, at 3:00pm (i.e., before class begins).

(4) The individual report involves writing your own report on how the cultural and social context of your team's chosen group, organization, or institution impacts the aspect of the information life-cycle that you have proposed to study. Your report should be 5-10 pages in length and can be based on any kind of research, including literature review, interviews, surveys, or any other appropriate research.
methods. It is due on March 31: please turn in a paper copy in class, and also submit the report electronically via Canvas. Please note that lack of experience with research methods is not a bar, as you may elect to write a literature review. You should make sure to answer the following questions in your report:

a) How did you study your selected aspect of the information life-cycle? Please be as detailed as possible.

b) What did you find? What were the findings of the literature review, interviews, survey, etc.?

c) What does it mean? What would you conclude based on your findings?

d) What can we learn from it? What best practices used here can apply elsewhere?

e) What can be improved? That is, based on what you have articulated as the group's social and cultural context, how could the information they produce or use better serve them?

(5) The final report should provide a comprehensive overview of the information life-cycle in the context of your selected group, organization, or institution’s social and cultural context, including providing answers for all questions from the individual report. However, unlike the individual reports, the teams will need to work together to synthesize your answers into a coherent report that must begin with an executive summary and end with takeaways. Your final report should be 20-30 pages in length and must be collaboratively written by all team members based on each team member's individual reports. Paper copies of final reports must be turned in in class, and reports should also be submitted electronically via Canvas by 3:00pm on Monday, April 28, 2014.

(6) The final presentation will be on the last day of class. Each presentation will be 15 minutes long, with an additional 5 minutes for questions and discussion. All team members must participate in both preparing and presenting the final presentation. Each team must submit PowerPoint slides via Canvas by 3:00pm on Monday, April 28, 2014.

Debates:

(a) Debates will be held during the first half of each class period. During the first two classes of a Unit, informal debates will be in small groups; during the third class of each Unit, we will have formal debates for the whole class. (Due to Spring Break and the individual report assignment, there may not be a formal debate for Unit III. This will be determined during the first few weeks of the semester.)

(b) During each debate, students will work in teams covering both sides of the debate. Each student will participate in one formal debate as a member of one of the teams of two or three students.

(c) Prior to each formal debate, you will need to identify at least two different outside readings per team member that you used to prepare for the debate, and each team member needs to prepare an informal one-page summary listing the readings as well as your planned contributions in terms of the different components of the debate. Basically, these help to ensure that you are prepared for the debate and help you to document the preparation that you did before each debate, but should be turned in at the end of the debate. You will need to coordinate with your team members prior to the debate to ensure that you select different readings and have assigned roles for the different components of the debate.
(d) Formal debates will begin with a coin toss to determine order, followed by opening statements by each side (5 minutes each), cross-examination between the sides (5 minutes each), initial questioning by the jury (8 minutes total), and closing arguments (1 minute each). After the closing arguments, the jury will vote on the winning side, but at that point we will continue with discussion in the form of questioning by the jury and between the sides until our discussion about the topic as debated is complete. Please make sure to coordinate your roles within your team prior to the debate, so you’ll be ready for all components.

(e) Formal debates will also include three additional roles, which will be randomly selected: moderator, time-keeper, and parliamentarian. The moderator’s role will be to introduce the debate question as well as the members of each team, as well as to transition from one part of the debate to the next. The timekeeper’s role will be to ensure that each segment of the debate is completed on schedule. The parliamentarian’s role is to ensure that the debate is civil, professional, and constructive, and to intervene if the debate gets off topic or if debaters violate the spirit of the debate or the course. Please note that the instructor may also intervene in any of these capacities on an as-needed basis.

(f) Any student not playing one of these roles will be a member of the jury. As a jury member, please come prepared with questions to ask both sides, and please note that performance as a juror as well as other roles will be evaluated as part of class participation.

(g) Your grade for each debate will be based on your preparation as documented in your one-page summary as well as your performance in the debate as evaluated by the instructor and the jury.

Behavior:

You are expected to meet the customary guidelines for ethical and professional behavior in this course. In particular you should be familiar with the University and School policies on academic dishonesty; they will, of course, be enforced in this course. If you are unsure please ask the instructor.

Grades will be determined as follows:

Class attendance and participation, 20%
Reading discussion posts, 10%
Debates (20%)
Projects (50%):
a) Project proposal, 10%
b) Individual report, 15%
c) Group report, 15%
d) Group presentation, 10%

Late discussion posts will not receive credit. For each day that project assignments are late, ten percent of the possible points will be deducted from the score. Students who anticipate difficulties with completing assignments on time should consult with the instructor as soon as possible.
COURSE SCHEDULE

NOTE: This schedule is preliminary until the first class meets and may change slightly through the semester if new issues come up.

January 13 (First Class Day): Background, discussion of class
- How to access class materials (Canvas)
- Discuss assignments.
- Fill out questionnaire about educational and technical background
- Overview of the idea and main concepts of the course: Information, Society, Culture.

January 20: NO CLASS – MLK Holiday

January 27: How to Read and Think about Information, Society, Culture


UNIT I: Values and Epistemology

February 3: Information and Personal Identity

Informal debate topic: Increased, intensive, personal access to information is changing how we construct our identities


**February 10: Information and Collective Identity**

Informal debate topic: Do physical or online communities facilitate better communication?


**February 17: Information in International Context**

Formal debate topic: Worldwide spread of mobile devices promotes individual freedom.


UNIT II: Information Policy

February 24: Standardization

Informal debate topic: Discuss standards as they are manifest in your group project.


Project Proposal Due

March 3: Intellectual Property

Informal debate topic: Discuss intellectual property as it plays out in your group project.


March 10: NO CLASS – Spring Break
March 17: Privacy and Surveillance

Formal debate topic: In a world of billions of people, where issues from climate change to threats of new epidemic disease and terrorist dangers are increasingly common, privacy is an outdated idea.


UNIT III: Information Work and Workers

March 24: Professional Ethics

Informal debate topic: When they conflict, should information professionals follow the code of ethics of their professional association or of their employing organization?


March 31: Roles for Information Professionals

Informal debate topic: Has online search increased or decreased the importance of information professionals?


**Individual Projects Due**

### Optional Readings for Unit III: Invisible Work


### UNIT IV: Information Institutions

#### April 7: Libraries

Informal debate topic: What library functions: do you want to keep; are likely to disappear; would you like to see that don't yet exist?


April 14: Archives

Informal debate topic: Is digital or analog better for preservation and curation?


April 21: Museums

Formal debate topic: Should professional curators or community members play a larger role in the creation of museum collections?


April 28: Group Project Presentations

Group Project Reports and Slides for Presentations Due