Assignment #3 — An Issue of Significance

A · Context

All information professionals wrestle with issues of representation, organization, classification and meaning-making (ROCM). Some of these issues have been around for a long time. Others are emerging with new technologies. Still others are being forced by new users and new societal demands. Issues and practices that used to be confined to society's "memory institutions" (libraries, archives, and museums) are spilling over into a much wider set of social of organizations and settings. In many ways—such as in practices of social tagging—everyone is entering into conversation about ROCM, with the result that concerns that were once restricted to a closed milieu and conducted in a specialized discourse have broken out into public society and common parlance.

   The aim of this course has been to examine some of these issues, to explore their technical, conceptual, and social context, and to develop some equipment for dealing with them. As we have seen, ROCM issues are rarely black-and-white. Very few questions in this area have absolute answers. Rather, ROCM expertise comes from being able to consider the multiple considerations that apply in any given circumstance, to be cognizant of less as well as more visible dimensions of the situation, and to come to a seasoned, considered, and appropriate judgment. As suggested in Part III, such judgments must be made in light of *what matters* about the issue—what ethical, political, and social implications impinge of deciding the issue in one way or other.

The aim of your final paper is for you to: (i) focus on some ROCM issue you especially care about; (ii) deploy the expertise you have developed over the course of the semester in order to explain how it is being affected by, will be affected by, or will shape the future of, our collective information practice; and (iii) to analyse those changes and recommend an appropriate route forward in light of the issue's social, ethical, and political dimensions.

B · Assignment

Note: the following five points are *not* intended to correspond to *parts* of your paper. Rather, you should read through this whole list, then think, then read, then think some more—and then write a coherent paper that, by the time it is done, addresses all of these points:

1. Choose a ROCM issue that was investigated in this course (call it **R**)—something that:
   a. Especially fascinated, frustrated, or sobered you;
   b. Is being affected by, or is affecting, contemporary information practice;
   c. Has substantial social/ethical/political significance in today's society.
2. Present **R**, analyse the issues involved in it, and explain its socio/political and/or ethical significance. Your discussion should include:
   a. A theoretical analysis, using materials and ideas from readings and class discussions; and
   b. One or more examples where it comes up in practice, illustrating its importance and demonstrating some of its (perhaps unexpected) subtleties or complexities.

3. Describe whether **R** is a new issue in the information field, or—if it is not—how it was classically treated.

4. Characterize the ways in which new developments in information practice (perhaps due to the development of digital technologies) are affecting the way **R** is or should be treated, or ways in which **R** is reflexively affecting information practice.

5. Based on the understanding you have developed over the course of the semester, present your ideas as to *how **R** should be treated in the future*. In answering this, you should:

   a. Refer to anticipated technological developments, reconfigurations of social practice (e.g., the rise of social media), labour or political concerns (e.g., "crowd-sourcing," changes in conceptions of privacy and surveillance, etc.), or other ways in which practice is changing that are affecting **R**.

   b. Identify the social, political, and ethical dimensions involved in or implicated by **R**, and articulate the aims or goals your proposed treatment of **R** is designed to advance; and

   c. Incorporate—and refer to—lessons and insights that you gained from taking INF1001 and INF1003 in the fall.

C · Details

1. Length: 3,000–4,000 words.
2. Due: Tuesday April 10 (last day of classes).
3. To be submitted in accord with the <u>submission requirements</u>[1] specified in the online INF1002 syllabus.
4. As always, you are welcome to discuss your thoughts and arguments with your classmates or other interlocutors, but your submitted paper should be written in your own words.
5. Papers will be graded in line with the Faculty of Information's <u>Grade Interpretation Guidelines</u>.[2]

D · Notes

In answering this question, especially part 5, you want to make a **reasonable claim**. Your claim—call it α—should meet the following criteria:

1. **Structurally**, α should be of the form *that …*, so that it would fit into the blanks in the sentence "In this paper I argue _____" in such a way as to make a complete grammatical sentence.

   a. That is, the form of α must be of the word 'that' followed by a *sentence*.

   b. I.e., α must state a *proposition*, for which you are to provide a compelling *argument*.

2. **Content-wise**, α should:

   a. Relate to the issues we've covered in our ROCM class;

   b. Be both *plausible* and *substantial* (not vapid)—in the sense that one could reasonably expect to find some educated, intelligent adults who agree with you, and also some who disagree.

For example, the following are appropriate candidates for such an α:

✔ "That formal cataloguing will be entirely replaced by social tagging."

✔ "That tagging supports only a weak form of user participation."

✔ "That the boundaries among the institutions of libraries, archives, and museums will increasingly blur."

✔ "That public libraries in multi-cultural cities should provide several different systematic catalogues, each created from a different cultural perspective, rather than using a single catalogue, as at present."

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[1] See http://individual.utoronto.ca/jemai/1002-2012/syllabus.html#assignments
[2] Available at <u>http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/grade-interpretation</u>

✔ "That open source projects and community informatics centres are better vehicles for the preservation of the social values historically associated with public libraries than are contemporary public libraries."

✔ "That, contrary to what was argued in lecture 7, scientific classification is not in fact sharp-edged and 'formal,' but, rather, impressively and surprisingly open-ended and flexible."

In contrast, the following are *not* appropriate candidates for an acceptable α:

✗ "That cell phones" ⟦ ⟸ not a sentence ⟧

✗ "That national security" ⟦ ⟸ not a sentence ⟧

✗ "That I believe that social tagging is an important socio-technical development" ⟦ ⟸ what you believe is not a ROCM topic (moreover, what reasonable person will disagree *that you believe this?*). And if the 'I believe' is removed, the suggestion runs the danger of being vapid—no reasonable person is likely to disagree. ⟧

✗ "That claims about the social importance of the impending *singularity*—when computational power exceeds that of the human brain—are vastly over-stated" ⟦ ⟸ not a ROCM topic ⟧

✗ "That classification helps users find things" ⟦ ⟸ no reasonable person would disagree ⟧

✗ "That the widespread digital distribution of media practices abets the imposition of U.S. culture onto the rest of the world" ⟦ ⟸ not a ROCM topic ⟧