

University of Toronto
Faculty of Information

INF 3001 Research in Information: Foundations

Fall 2011

Instructor information

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Course information

Number: INF3001H
Title: Research in information: Foundations
Semester: Fall, 2011
Location: Room 312, Bissell Building
Time: Monday 1:00pm-4:00pm [Sept. 12 - Dec. 5]

Catalog description

“*INF3001H Research in Information: Foundations*. An introduction to, exploration of, and examination of the fundamental intellectual landscape of information research. Topics include: (i) an historically, conceptually and methodologically grounded understanding of the use of concepts of information and knowledge across the academy (in philosophy, history, social science, politics, engineering, etc.); and (ii) contemporary uses of 'information' as a substantial theoretical notion, both in the world in general (e.g., in public political discourse, in such constructions as “the information or knowledge age, economy, society, etc.”), and in such fields as political theory, biology, medicine, computing, etc.”

Objectives

Regardless of one's research focus it will always build on previous research contributions - and any inquiry falls within particular traditions of scholarship. Information studies offers a host of scholarly traditions and histories; some will characterize the information studies field as multi-disciplinary, others as inter-disciplinary, few as an autonomous discipline. Central to any information studies tradition is a discussion of its relation to and application of the notion of *information* – and the understanding of that relationship often determines the basic understanding of the field. We will explore both the notion and the relationship in this course.

As one of the required doctoral seminars in the program, this course aims to provide some familiarity with foundational literature involving the use of information as a theoretical concept. The course allows students to develop a methodologically neutral approach to the study of information, and more importantly it gives students a reflexively critical appreciation of one's own and other's methods, approaches, perspectives, insights, normative standards, and professional practices. Ultimately, the course allows students to identify, analyze, and articulate their own interests within one or more information studies traditions.

Outcomes

On successful completion of this course students will be able to:

- compare and contrast different notions of information.
- compare and contrast different traditions of information studies.
- identify different epistemological traditions.
- lead and engage in discussions with peers.
- justify a conceptual tradition for their own research agenda.

Schedule

The class meets once a week - it is important that everyone come to class well prepared; having read the assigned readings and ready to engage in discussions about the readings. I have listed the readings for each week below – they are listed alphabetically, which might not necessarily be the order in which you may want to read them.

Date	Topics	Readings	Lead
Sept. 12	Introductions. Initial exploration of information, information studies, traditions, and foundations.	[Gleick, 2011]	Jens-Erik
Sept. 19	Locating information	Brookes, 1980 Castells, 2010, ch. 1 Floridi, 2010, ch. 1+2 McLuhan, 1964, ch. 1+2 Nunberg, 1996 Rayward, 1996	Jens-Erik
Sept. 26	Disciplining information, I	Blanchette, 2011 Braman, 2007, ch. 2 Floridi, 2010, ch. 3-8 Floridi, 2008 Qvortrup, 1993	Andy Matt Harrison Eva ginger
Oct. 3	<i>Paper proposals due</i> Disciplining information, II	Bates, 2006 Brier, 2004 Dretske, 2008 Furner, 2004 Hjørland, 2007	Heidi Jenna Natasha Sheril Sandra
Oct. 10	No class – Thanksgiving [Jens-Erik at ASIST annual meeting]		

Oct. 17	<u>Sharing of paper topics</u>		
	Framing the study of information, I	Benton & Craib 2001 Chapter 1	Heidi
Oct. 24	Framing the study of information, II <i>Nature and positivism</i>	Benton & Craib 2001 Chapter 2 Chapter 3 Chapter 4	ginger Sheril Matt
Oct. 31	Framing the study of information, III <i>Interpretation and rationality</i>	Benton & Craib 2001 Chapter 5 Chapter 6 Chapter 7	Natasha Eva Andy
Nov. 7	Framing the study of information, IV <i>Hermeneutics, critical theory, objectivism, and post-modernism</i>	Benton & Craib 2001 Chapter 8 Chapter 9 Chapter 10 Chapter 11	Sandra Harrison Jenna Jens-Erik
Nov. 14	Paper presentation/discussion	TBA TBA	Eva Andy
Nov. 21	Paper presentation/discussion	TBA TBA TBA	Harrison Sheril Sandra
Nov. 28	Paper presentation/discussion	TBA TBA TBA	Jenna Matt Heidi
Dec. 5	Paper presentation/discussion	TBA TBA	ginger Natasha
Dec. 12	No class – but: <u>final papers due</u>		

Readings

Readings marked with an (*) are not available on the Blackboard site for the course – you will need to obtain these readings yourself.

Bates, Marcia J. 2006. Fundamental forms of information. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57 (8): 1033-1045.

* Benton, Ted & Ian Craib. 2001/2010. *Philosophy of Social Science: The Philosophical Foundation of Social Thought*. New York, NY: Palgrave.

Blanchette, Jean-François. 2011. A material history of bits. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 62 (6): 1042-1057.

- Braman, Sandra. 2007. *Change of state: Information, policy, and power*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Brier, Søren. 2004. Cybersemiotics and the problem of the information-processing paradigm as a candidate for a unified science of information behind library and information science. *Library Trends*, 52 (3): 629-657.
- Brookes, B.C. 1980. The foundation of information science. Part I. Philosophical aspects. *Journal of Information Science*, 2 (3-4): 125-133.
- Castells, Manuel. 2010. *The information age: Economy, society, and culture. Volume I: The rise of the network society. Second edition*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dretske, Fred. 2008. Epistemology and information. In *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science. Volume 8: Philosophy of Information*, ed. Pieter Adriaans and Johan van Benthem. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- * Floridi, Luciano. 2010. *Information. A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Floridi, Luciano. 2008. Trends in the philosophy of information. In *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science. Volume 8: Philosophy of Information*, ed. Pieter Adriaans and Johan van Benthem. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Furner, Jonathan. 2004. Information studies without information. *Library Trends*, 52 (3): 427-446.
- * Gleick, James. 2011. *The information. A history. A theory. A flood*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hjørland, Birger. 2007. Information: Objective or subjective/situational? *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 58 (10): 1448-1456.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey. 1996. Farewell to the information age. In *The Future of the Book*, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Qvortrup, Lars. 1993. The controversy over the concept of information: An overview and a selected and annotated bibliography. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 1 (4): 3-24.
- Rayward, W. Boyd. 1996. The history and historiography of information science: Some reflections. *Information Processing and Management*, 32 (1): 3-17.

Assignments

There are three *graded* and three *ungraded* assignments in this course. To pass the course you need to receive at least a B- as the final grade (see how to calculate the final grade under Practical Stuff) - and you must complete *all* assignments (graded as well as ungraded).

Please make sure to consult the iSchool's official interpretation [<http://bit.ly/nijrj>] of UofT's letter grade system [<http://bit.ly/r6G8M>] - taken together these documents explain the letter grade system and the meaning of the individual letter grades.

Participation. 30% of final grade.

This is a discussion class. I expect everyone to actively participate in class discussions; the class will only be successful if everyone takes part in the learning and in the discussions. Participation is not the same as showing up for class. Participation means that you engage in the material and contribute to the class' collective work in a constructive and critical way. I will attempt to provide a range of learning experiences that will integrate formal input, personal and professional experiences, discussion, reflection, and action. Your success--and the

success of your peers--depends on your regular engagement in and contribution to the collective work of the class.

Your participation will be evaluated according to two principles: *quantity and quality*. Quantity addresses how often you engage in discussions, how often you start a discussion, how often you comment on other people's discussion contributions, etc. It is important to contribute often – but it is equally important that you don't dominate or take over the discussions. Quality is a matter of whether you offer insights that bring discussions forward, whether you ask question that help the class think constructively about the issues, whether you offer insights when the discussion is stuck or off on a tangent, etc.

Discussion leads. *2x5% of final grade.*

Each student will lead two discussions – one about a paper on the notion of information and one about a philosophical position.

1. Each student is assigned (more or less randomly) a text that discusses the notion of information to be discussed on Sept. 26 or Oct. 3. The goal is to get the class engaged in a critical analysis of the assigned text.
2. Each student is assigned to lead the discussion about a chapter in Benton & Craib's book. The goal is to i) highlight key elements in the philosophical position and to get the class to critically discuss the chapter and ii) to characterize the notion of information (or any other object of study) as it will be used in the particular tradition. We will discuss Benton & Craib's book on Oct. 17, 24, 31, and Nov. 7.

For both discussions: You can assume that everyone in the class has read the texts so don't spend too much on presentation (a few minutes should be enough). Focus on the key elements and what makes the paper/chapter unique. The purpose of the discussion is to expand the class' understanding of the readings. How you do that is up to you. Please give the class a brief hand-out (no more than 1 page) - but remember that the goal is to get the class to critically discuss the reading (don't merely summarize the reading).

Your discussion leads will be evaluated on how successful you were in getting the class engaged in discussions about the reading; I assume you were either successful (and you will received an A) or you weren't successful (you will received a B).

Proposal for paper. *Ungraded.*

Please give me (via e-mail or in paper) a proposal (300-500 words) for a paper and a provisional list of references by 4:00pm on *Monday Oct. 3*. You can slip it under my office door or you can email it to me.

Sharing of paper topics. *Ungraded.*

Please share your selected paper topic with the class on *Monday Oct. 17*. Please briefly explain the topic of your paper, the issues you will investigate, your argument (thesis), a tentative conclusion, and problems that you are struggling with at the time.

Presentation of paper. *Ungraded.*

Present a working draft of your paper to the class. I suggest that you use 15 min. to present your work, and that you use the remaining time to Q&A and discussion. You will have a total of 50 min. The purpose of the presentation/discussion is to help you finalize your paper (the

purpose is not to impress the class) - so you may want to raise a number of discussion issues related to your work, ask the class to read and comment on particular articles, give the class an in-class exercise, get the class to discuss and think through an issue, etc.

Please give the class a couple articles or books chapters that are central to your work – these will be read by the class prior to your presentation and should give an insight into some of the core issues of your paper. The class should receive these no later than one week prior to your presentation.

Please post an abstract or short description of your paper to the class mailing list the day before your presentation.

Final paper. 60% of final grade.

For your final paper you should explore, discuss, and evaluate theoretical traditions and concepts in information studies. You can:

- (i) discuss and analyze a particular theoretical tradition in information studies, discuss its philosophical foundation, discuss its application in information studies, and evaluate its soundness.
- (ii) place your own work within a theoretical tradition, discuss the ramifications of using that particular tradition in your work, and discuss future theoretical work in regard to your own work and/or the tradition.
- (iii) survey the range of a theoretical position/tradition or a particular phenomenon in information studies, either from a historical perspective or from a topical perspective, and discuss its focus, strengths, and methodologies.

The final paper is due *Monday December 12 @ 12noon*. You can slip the paper under my office door or submit it in the Student Service office (who will time stamp your paper). *The paper cannot be submitted as an attachment to an e-mail.*

Length: The final paper should be 6,000 - 7,000 words in length, excluding references.

Format: Please pick an information studies journal to which you could imagine submitting the paper - follow that journal's format for your final paper. Please enclose a copy of the journal's author instructions when submitting your final paper.

The paper will be evaluated according to mainstream scholarly standards: is thesis clear?, is writing clear and engaging?, is the paper well-organized?, is it adequately documented, drawing on appropriate sources?, is the literature synthesized, discussed and analyzed?, does the paper contribute new knowledge?, is the conclusion supported by the research presented?, etc. I am especially interested in papers that are creative, original and insightful – in papers that aim to give substantial voice to views and problems, rather than papers that are mere rearrangement of already established ideas and positions.

Writing support

Students are strongly recommended to consult the writing centres' website [<http://bit.ly/oGNQ9R>], which presents a wealth of material and lists a variety of writing courses available free to all students. Students are also encouraged to seek out the School of Graduate Studies' writing centre [<http://bit.ly/okMRZA>] and their resources website [<http://bit.ly/pQ3WYG>] that is geared especially towards graduate students.

For additional writing tips: I have written up a short note about what I am looking for in a paper [<http://bit.ly/r15TMw>] – Brian Cantwell Smith has produced a more comprehensive document [<http://bit.ly/nvaRi8>].

Resources

In this course we will encounter a number of concepts, ideas, and notions that might be new – and which might be confusing, or difficult to grasp. Below are a number of resources that might help in getting a better handle on the terminology and ideas.

Epistemological Lifeboat [<http://www.iva.dk/jni/lifeboat/>]

“The Epistemological Lifeboat is an attempt to guide students and researchers into the complex field of epistemology/philosophy of science. It is intended as a “lifeboat” or a “philosophy for dummies”. It is obviously not enough for serious studies, but it provides an overview and refers the reader to further sources of information.”

International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences [<http://bit.ly/nsHhIZ>]

“This Encyclopedia is the first attempt in a generation to map the social and behavioral sciences on a grand scale.”

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>]

“Most of the articles in The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy are original contributions by specialized philosophers around the Internet.”

Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy [<http://bit.ly/owyXs4>]

“Comprehensive resource. Articles from all continents, all periods and cultures.”

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [<http://plato.stanford.edu/>]

“From its inception, the SEP was designed so that each entry is maintained and kept up to date by an expert or group of experts in the field. All entries and substantive updates are refereed by the members of a distinguished Editorial Board before they are made public.”

Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org/>]

Not a bad place to *begin*...

Practical stuff

How to study for the course

The outcome of this course depends to a large degree on your active participation. It is important that you have read and wrestled with the assigned texts before each class. You need to read the texts in such a manner that you can answer questions about them, but also, and perhaps even more importantly that you can engaged in critical discussions about the texts and that you can ask questions that will expand our understanding of the texts. In other words, you control the outcome of the course. It is your responsibility to do what is necessary to understand the texts, e.g. read the texts multiple times, write an abstract or outline of the texts, participate in study groups to discuss the texts, etc.

I urge you to use a critical approach when reading the texts. This means that for each text you should think about what the main point of the text is. What is the author's message? What is it that he/she wants to convey? Do you agree with the author? Why/why not? Place the text in a context. Consider for example how the text/author--consciously or unconsciously--relates itself to other texts in this course and other courses. How does it relate to other discussion we have had in class? Etc., etc.

Always remember to ask and answer the most important question when facing scientific and scholarly literature: SO WHAT? This is a simple way to ask whether the text makes a difference for you, whether it brings the field a step further.

Late papers

Students are expected to submit their work by the date specified in the syllabus. However, I understand that sometimes this is not possible, but it is important that they let me know--before the deadline--if they are unable to meet the deadlines. Late papers may be accepted without academic penalty if--prior to the due date of the assignment--the student has made an arrangement with the instructor for a later specific submission date. Please note that assignments submitted later than their specified due date will be deducted an academic penalty of 1/3 of a grade per week (e.g., A- to B+, B to B-), commencing after the due day.

No assignments will be accepted after *Monday December 19, 2011*. [In other words, all students must by December 19 have submitted all assignments. If a student has not completed all assignments by December 19, then the student must submit a Request for Extension to Complete Course Work [<http://bit.ly/oQJEOb>]. Besides all the requested data, all fields in Section 1 must be filled out, and the reasons for the delay must be described in as much detail as possible. The form must be signed and it must be submitted in hard-copy to the Student Service office in an envelope with the instructor's name. Students who fail to submit either all assignments or the Request for a Course Extension by December 19 will have their final grade calculated based on the coursework completed by December 19.]

Calculating final grades

All grades you receive in this course will be expressed as a letter – the following will help you convert letter grades for the individual assignments into a letter grade for the final grade:

First: Each letter is converted to a number: A+=9, A=8, A-=7, B+=6, B=5, B-=4, FZ=0.

Second: Apply the number for each assignment into this equation:
 $(partici*0.3)+(lead1*0.05)+(lead2*0.05)+(paper*0.6)=value\ for\ final\ grade$

Third: Convert the 'value for final grade' back into a letter, using the above conversation table.

Note: Any value ending in x.6 and below is rounded down, any value ending in x.7 and above is rounded up.

[The above follows the Faculty of Information's policy on this matter.]

Academic integrity

The essence of academic life revolves around respect not only for the ideas of others, but also their rights to those ideas and their promulgation. It is therefore essential that all of us engaged in the life of the mind take the utmost care that the ideas and expressions of ideas of other people always be appropriately handled, and, where necessary, cited. For writing

assignments, when ideas or materials of others are used, they must be cited. The format is not that important – as long as the source material can be located and the citation verified, it's OK. What is important is that the material be cited. In any situation, if you have a question, please feel free to ask. Such attention to ideas and acknowledgment of their sources is central not only to academic life, but life in general.

Please acquaint yourself with UofT's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters [<http://bit.ly/piTokw>].

Students with a disability or diverse learning styles

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please approach your instructor and/or the Accessibility Services office [<http://bit.ly/r2pOGJ>] as soon as possible. Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let them and me know about your needs, the more quickly I can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

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