The Sociology of Information: Politics, Power, and Property

It has become a cliché to state that in contemporary society, information is power. But what exactly does that mean? Who uses information, and for what purposes? This course will examine the claim that information is a key economic and political resource in advanced capitalist societies. It will pose the questions: what is the information society, and how is it (or is it not) different from previous eras; what is at stake in the control over information; and who are the information poor and how are they disadvantaged. As well as comparing varying theoretical perspectives on these issues, we will address a number of related themes, including privacy and surveillance, and the ownership and commodification of information. The course will also include sections that address the role of information in government, finance, science, and marketing. While information technologies will necessarily be discussed, the focus of the course will not be on technology per se, but on the substance, uses, and social roles of information itself.

Learning Goals

Students who complete this course will:

Learn about sociological theories regarding the concepts of information and the information society.
Assess the role of information in gaining interpersonal, societal, and economic power.
Identify the social and political foundations of debates concerning information policies.
Discover and evaluate sources of data on social issues related to information.

Requirements

Students are expected to keep up with the readings, attend class, and actively participate in discussions. Seven times during the semester (in seven different weeks of your choosing), you are to post discussion questions or comments on Latte. These questions should pertain to the topic and readings assigned for that week. Your posts should be made by 8:00 PM on either Sunday or Tuesday so that we all have time to read and think about them before class takes place. In addition, you will complete a short paper covering readings and other course material, a research paper in the form of a case study that reflects on various themes from the class, and a take-home final exam consisting of essay questions.

I expect courtesy in the classroom. That means arriving to class on time, turning cell phones off before class begins, no texting, and no side conversations. Please recognize how distracting these latter behaviors are for your classmates and your instructor. If you bring food or drink to class, remember to clean up after yourself.

My policy on laptops is that they should be used only for class-related purposes. Other uses are
highly distracting for you, for me, and for those sitting around you. If I notice you reading email, checking Facebook, watching a broadcast or anything else not related to class, I will call you on it. If these behaviors become a persistent problem, then laptops will be prohibited in class.

**Evaluation**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short paper (4-5 pages)</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper (7-8 pages)</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take-home final</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latte posts</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Students are expected to uphold standards of academic integrity. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person without proper acknowledgement of that source. This means that you must use references and, where appropriate, quotation marks to indicate the source of any phrases, sentences, or ideas not your own -- whether they are found in written materials or on the Internet, and whether they are created by a published author, another student, or your parent. Violations of University policies on academic integrity may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, and could end in suspension from the University. Students with questions about standards of academic integrity are advised to consult Section 4 of Rights and Responsibilities from the Brandeis Student Handbook and/or speak to me. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, you must ask for clarification.

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, you should contact me, and present your letter of accommodation, as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services at 736-3470. Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

The readings for Weeks 1-4 are on the Latte site for this class. Look at the section titled "Readings."

All other readings are contained in a custom course packet. Information on how to purchase this will be announced in class.

**Course Schedule**

**week 1**  
**Jan 13**  
**Introduction**

**week 1-2**  
**Jan 15-22**  
**The Discovery of Information**

Daniel R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age*


**week 3**
**Jan 27-29**

*The Uses of Information: Controlling People and Processes*


**What Is the Information Society**


**Utopian Popularizers**


**Skeptical Critics**

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**Accumulating Information: Guides and Guardians**

Mar 3-5


Short paper due Monday, March 3rd

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**Government: Secrecy, Censorship, and Surveillance**

Mar 10-12


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**Personal Information: Work, Family, and the Public Sphere**

Mar 17-19


week 10
Mar 24-26

**Personal Information: Selling and Marketing**


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week 11
Mar 31-Apr 2

**Banking and Finance**


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week 12
Apr 7-9

**Intellectual Property: Copyright**


Peter T. Paterno, letter to Joe Walsh, January 26, 2010.

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weeks 13-14
Apr 14-23

**Intellectual Property: Patents**


Stephen B. Scharper and Hilary Cunningham, "The Genetic Commons: Resisting the Neo-

Research paper due Monday, April 14th

**Scientific Knowledge**


Take-home final due Friday, May 2nd (seniors)

Friday, May 9th (all others)