

# *History & Theory of Information*

*History 300-0-22*

*Communication Studies 395-0-20*

*Advanced undergraduate lecture*

*Winter 2020*

## **Lectures:**

Mon., Wed. 2-3:20pm (Locy Hall 111)

## **Discussion sections:**

60: Wed. 4-4:50pm (Locy 110)

61: Thurs. 10-10:50am (Locy 110)

62: Thurs. 11-11:50am (Locy 305)

## **Teaching staff contact information and drop-in hours:**

[Esther Ginestet](#): Main Library Café, Wed. 9-11am

[Daniel Immerwahr](#): 225 Harris, Fri. 1:30-3:30pm

[Aaron Shaw](#): 2-142 Frances Searle, Mon. 10-11:50am

If you can't make drop-in hours, you can schedule an appointment with any member of the teaching staff. Please email to set a time.

## **Course description:**

We live in an information age, with computers of unprecedented power in our pockets. This course seeks to understand how information shapes our lives today, and how it has in the past. It does so via an interdisciplinary inquiry into four technological infrastructures of information and communication—print, wires, airwaves, and bits.

## **Course books**

These books are available at the university bookstore in Norris. We've also placed them on reserve at the library. All other required readings are online via Canvas.

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2016 rev. edition
2. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 1996 [1888] Dover Thrift ed. (it's also available free online)

## **Format**

The course, jointly taught by faculty in Communication Studies and History, will incorporate two weekly lectures and weekly discussion sections. The lectures will synthesize a range of historical and theoretical perspectives, the discussion sections will focus on a single reading or pair of readings.

## **Assignments and responsibilities**

Every week you are responsible for completing the assigned readings, attending both lectures and discussion section, and completing quizzes as well as any other assignments.

In the first minutes of class on Monday (unless otherwise specified), you'll receive a reading quiz, consisting of multiple-choice questions, graded out of 10 points. The quiz will start when class starts and end four minutes later. If you are slightly late, you might be able to complete the quiz in time, but you must hand in your quiz even if it's not done. If you are very late or absent, you'll get a zero. There are no make-up quizzes. At the end of the term, we'll drop your lowest quiz grade.

The center of this course will be your discussion section. Attendance and participation are mandatory. You can miss one section without penalty for any reason. Beyond that, you'll need documentation from the dean's office to have absences excused. If you are seriously ill, go to the Searle Center and give them permission to share your diagnosis with the dean's office. Then talk to your advisor about sending us an exculpatory note.

Sections are meant to provide you with an opportunity to confront, challenge, and explore the major themes of each week in a safe, respectful environment. Your active participation is indispensable, so come prepared, ready to test out ideas and

hypotheses. Please keep in mind that participation is about more than who speaks the most. It is also about demonstrating a willingness to think through your own and others' ideas. Some ground rules:

1. Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs different from yours. Challenge the idea, not the person.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree. Comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker's comments.
3. Be courteous. Don't interrupt or engage in private conversations while others are speaking.
4. Support your statements. Use evidence and provide a rationale for your points.
5. Allow everyone the chance to talk. If you have spoken a lot already, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.

## **Midterm and final**

The exams will cover material from lectures and from the assigned readings (including background readings). The exams will consist of short-answer questions.

You can't take the midterm or final on a different date. But either may be replaced by an essay (1900-2200 words for the midterm, 3000-3300 words for the final) plus an oral exam. The essays are due 24 hours before the oral exams and the oral exams must be completed before the in-class exams they are replacing. The essays will be on a prompt that we give you and will cover the course material up to the point covered by the corresponding exam; they will not require outside research or the development of novel arguments. Until you have successfully scheduled a time to take your oral exam, you will be expected to take the in-class exam.

## **Assignments 1 & 2**

The premise for both assignments: You work for a consulting firm, NUIdeas, that has been tasked with providing academic advice to firms, social movements, governments, and other organizations facing pressing problems. Your job will be to take material you have gleaned from readings, discussion, and lectures and use it to define a problem and advise your client how to think about it.

The format of these reports is up to you. If you want to use graphs, illustrations, bullet points, tables, or section headings, do so. But whatever their format, your papers should feature clear, correct, and persuasive prose. Citations should be properly formatted (Kate Turabian's *Manual for Writers*, available in the library, is a reliable guide). Remember, you are trying to look good in front of your boss and your clients.

### Assignment 1: 1400-1800 words

It's the year 1848. You've attended the [Seneca Falls Convention](#) in the United States, a meeting of feminists seeking to win women's rights. They have just published their program, the "[Declaration of Sentiments](#)." Your job is to produce a report drawing on materials from this class and advising them how they ought to think about their challenge from an informational perspective, and how they might make forward progress. A warning: if all you say boils down to, "You need to get your message out there by publicizing it," we won't be very impressed. Better papers will intelligently reflect on the themes of this course to make more specific and sophisticated recommendations.

### Assignment 2: 1800-2200 words

Now you have a choice. Pick your own issue and organization, past or present. Write a report, drawing on course materials, on how they should think about their problem and how they might move forward. Please note that we require you to meet with a member of the teaching staff to discuss your plan for this assignment more than 1 week before it is due.

### Assessment rubric for Assignments 1&2

The teaching team will evaluate both assignments along the following dimensions and criteria. Keep in mind, these dimensions and criteria don't correspond to specific point values or anything like that. They also tend to escalate in terms of difficulty. An exceptional paper does all of these things exceptionally; a very good paper does all of these things well; a good paper does most of these things well; etc.

**Clarity & style:** Is the paper readable and clear? Is it free of errors? Is the writing logically organized and coherent? Are sources appropriately cited/documentated?

**Quality of analysis:** Does the paper provide clear, original, and well-supported arguments and interpretation? Does it identify and analyze the challenge(s) facing the organization effectively? Where possible/reasonable, does the analysis draw on relevant evidence to support its claims and recommendations?

**Scope:** Does the argument adapt a suitable scope given the length constraints of the assignment? Does it provide a thorough and focused analysis of the key issues at hand? Is there an appropriate balance between high-level generalities and specific details?

**Quality of insight:** Does the paper propose a clear strategy and/or actions in response to the situation? Do the proposed strategy and/or actions seem compelling and worth adopting given the evidence presented? Do the proposed strategies or actions reflect a creative and sophisticated synthesis of available evidence, relevant course materials, and other resources the author has chosen to draw upon?

## Grading

Participation	10%
Quizzes	15%
Assignment 1	10%
Midterm	15%
Assignment 2	30%
Final	20%

## Appealing grades

If, after receiving a graded paper or exam back, you are confused by the grade or feel that it is not an accurate representation of your work, you have two options:

1. Meet with whoever graded your work and ask for a clarification. You can then sit down and talk about your work, grading standards, possibilities for improvement, and so on.
2. Submit to your grader, in writing, an account of why you felt that the grade you received was inaccurate (not disappointing—inaccurate). If appropriate, they will be happy to regrade your work. This will not result in a lower grade.
3. Regrading may take up to one month after the submission of the request.

It's fine if you'd like to meet with your grader and then, after that meeting, request a regrade, but regrade requests must be made in writing.

### **Accommodations and support:**

Students requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition must register with AccessibleNU and provide us with notification from ANU within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential. Students can find useful resources for safety and security, academic support, and mental and physical health and well-being at the [NUhelp website](#) and through the [NUhelp app](#).

Counseling and mental health services are available (free of charge for all students, faculty, and staff) through Northwestern Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Please visit the [CAPS website](#) or call (847) 491-2151 to learn more or schedule an appointment.

If you want to additional help with your writing, visit the [Writing Place](#) or the [History Writing Center](#). Both offer students chances to discuss their writing at any stage in the process (brainstorming ideas, working through a draft, and reviewing past assignments).

### **Plagiarism**

An easy way for an undergraduate to destroy her college career is by plagiarizing. Please consult the [university and school policies on academic integrity](#) for (much) more detail. Please read them, as you will be held accountable to them. The main principles:

1. If you rely on someone else's ideas or information, cite your source.
2. If you use someone else's words, enclose those words in quotation marks and cite your source. Taking someone else's prose, modifying it slightly, and passing it off as your own is never appropriate, even if you include a footnote.
3. You may not turn in work that is identical to or derivative of work you have turned in for another class without both prior permission and a clear accounting of what is old and what is new.

We will report all suspected cases of plagiarism immediately to the appropriate dean(s).

## **Electronics**

Laptops and tablets are great for note-taking but carry enormous potential to distract their users and, more importantly, anyone sitting behind their users. So, if you plan to use a laptop, we request that you sit in the designated section of the classroom. We also request that you monitor your behavior and ask yourself whether your computer is helping you learn or distracting you. Internet surfing, phone-checking, headphones, and noise-creating devices are prohibited.

## **Late submission of assignments**

For late submissions, we will apply penalties to the grades for Assignments 1 or 2 in the following way.

If a paper is submitted after the deadline, and...

...within one business day of the deadline (i.e., before the Monday class meeting for an assignment due on Friday), we will lower the grade by one "notch" (e.g., an A becomes an A-).

...within four business days of the deadline, we will lower the grade by two "notches" (e.g., an A becomes a B+).

...more than four business days after the deadline, we will dock a full grade (e.g., an A becomes a B).

We will not accept submissions more than 2 weeks after the deadline for Assignment 1 or Assignment 2 (and please note that the grading deadline for the quarter is two weeks after March 9, so submitting that late would create a very inconvenient situation).

## Schedule

In general, the readings assigned for the course are short and we expect that you will engage with them deeply. Along the way (e.g., in lecture slides), we will indicate additional background and supplementary materials relevant to specific topics covered in the course.

The teaching staff will communicate any changes to the course schedule at least one week in advance of due dates or deadlines via Canvas.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Week of Jan. 6*

- Mon. Information and Technology [No quiz]
- Wed. The Promise of Liberation [Quiz happens today]

### *Reading*

Condorcet, Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de. 1795.  
Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind,  
Being a Posthumous Work of the Late M. de Condorcet. London: J.  
Johnson. Pp. 1-12 of introduction, epoch 8, pp. 224-231 of epoch 9,  
and epoch 10.

Please note there are two ways to read this: you can virtually page through an original edition (John Adams's copy, with his marginalia!) [here](#) or use the cleaner pdf on [Canvas](#).

## PAPER

### *Week of Jan. 13*

- Mon. Diffusion of the Gutenberg Revolution
- Wed. Oceans of Print

### *Reading*

Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. 1968. "Some Conjectures about the Impact of  
Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report."

The Journal of Modern History 40 (1): 1–56.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/240164>. Uploaded to [Canvas](#).

*Week of Jan. 20*

Mon. NO CLASS  
Wed. Imagined Communities [Quiz happens today]

*Reading*

Anderson, Benedict 2016. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. New York: Verso. Revised edition. [Chaps. 1-3, 5, 7, and 10.]  
“Benedict Anderson: The Missing Chapters,” on [Canvas](#)

WIRES

*Week of Jan. 27*

Mon. “The Enemy is Near”: Information and Empire  
Wed. “Annihilator of Space and Time”

*Reading*

Carey, James W. 2009. “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph.” In Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society, Revised edition, 155–77. New York: Taylor & Francis. On [Canvas](#).

**Fri., January 31: Assignment 1 due by 5pm.**

*Week of Feb. 3*

Mon. Paperwork  
Wed. Information Theory and Telephones

*Reading*

Bellamy, Edward. 1996 [1888]. Looking Backward. New York: Dover Publications. [Preface and Chapters 1, 3, 5-7, 9-15, 17, 22, 26, 28]

## AIRWAVES

*Week of Feb. 10*

**Mon. Midterm [No quiz]**

Wed. Broadcast and the Masses [Quiz happens today]

*Reading*

Lepore, Jill. 2018. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. New York: Norton. [Chapter 11](#).

Lazarsfeld et al. 1944. *The People's Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press. [Selections \(Chapters 2, 6, 8, 14-16\)](#).

*Week of Feb. 17*

Mon. Pointillist Empire [No quiz]

Wed. Information Institutions and Power [Quiz happens today]

*Reading*

Innis, H. A. 1949. "The Bias of Communication." *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Economiques et Science Politique* 15 (4): 457-76.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/138041> and [on Canvas](#).

## BITS

*Week of Feb. 24*

Mon. The Global Village [No quiz]

Wed. Decentralization and the Web [Quiz happens today]

*Reading*

John Perry Barlow, [A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#).

Benkler, Yochai. 2006. [The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom](#). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Part 1: The Networked Information Economy (pp. 29-129 —note that this includes the [short intro](#) to Part 1 as well as Chapters [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#)).

**Assignment 2 Discussion:** Identify the problem/challenge you plan to work on as well as ideas for contexts/entities in which you might analyze it. Meet with \*someone\* on the teaching team to discuss it by the end of February.

*Week of March 2*

Mon. Digital Dreams [Quiz happens today]  
Wed. Social Production, Social Failures [No quiz]

*Reading*

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. [The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power](#). New York: Public Affairs, Chapters 1-3 and 18.

*Week of March 9*

Mon. Centralist Threats? [No quiz]  
**Assignment 2 due March 9 at noon, uploaded to Canvas.**

**FINAL: Friday, March 20, 3-5pm, 111 Locy Hall (i.e., the regular room)**

## References

- Anderson, Benedict 2016. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso. Revised edition.
- Barlow, John Perry. 1996. "[A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.](#)" Electronic Frontier Foundation.
- Bellamy, Edward. 1996. *Looking Backward*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Carey, James W. 2009 [1983]. "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph." In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Revised edition, 155–77. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Condorcet, Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de. 1795. *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind, Being a Posthumous Work of the Late M. de Condorcet*. London: J. Johnson.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. 1968. "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report." *The Journal of Modern History* 40 (1): 1–56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/240164>.
- Innis, H. A. 1949. "The Bias of Communication." *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Economiques et Science Politique* 15 (4): 457–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/138041>.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lepore, Jill. 2019. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.