Syllabus

I • Coordinates

1. Course: INF2242: Studying Information and Knowledge Practices
   b. Time: Wednesday, 9:00 a.m. — 12:00 p.m.
   c. Place: BL313 (Bissell Bldg., 140 St George Street, St.)

2. Instructor: Brian Cantwell Smith
   a. E-mail: brian.cantwell.smith@utoronto.ca
   b. Office: Room 633, Faculty of Information, Bissell Bldg.
   c. Office hours: Thursday, 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

II • Course Description and Objectives

A. The official course description:
   This is a seminar-style course that engages critical theories of knowledge-making practices and methodological approaches to their study. The focus is methodological and extends from the foundational themes and topics in information and knowledge. The emphasis is on how to study these issues, rather than merely on what the issues are. Approaches include ethnographic field studies, laboratory studies, critical discourse analysis, feminist science studies, social construction of technology, actor-network theory, activity theory, and distributed cognition.

B. Or in other words:
   This course studies the applicability of different methods, methodologies, analytic frameworks, and theoretical approaches to information research within the context of research design. Students will:
   1. Select a topic (“case”) on which they would be interested in conducting research;
   2. Study a number of concepts, methods, methodologies, and approaches that might be used to investigate this topic—figuring out, for each:
      a. Which aspects or dimensions of the topic would be illuminated by using those methods or analytic techniques;
      b. Which aspects or dimensions would not be illuminated, if those methods and techniques were used—i.e., what would be misconstrued, unfairly “torqued,” relegated to the background, or even “disappeared” from view; and, in general,
      c. How the choice of methods, approaches, techniques, etc., would affect the questions that would be asked, influence the kinds of “results” that will be gleaned, and shape the form of knowledge that would be produced.
   3. As a final project, develop a research proposal for investigating the topic, that:
      a. Describes the overarching issue and explains its interest and importance;
      b. Identifies the methods/methodologies/concepts/approaches that would be used to address the issue;
c. Explains why that those approaches and frameworks were chosen;
d. Formulates, in detail, the specific questions would be asked so as to fit the chosen methodological/analytic framework; and
e. Defends a claim that the proposed choice of methods or analytic techniques will “do the best justice” to the topic—by arguing how and why the results that would emerge from investigating the topic in this way would be most authentically illuminating of, fair to, and insightful into what matters most about the issue under investigation.

Since the proposed research project will not be conducted, the proposal to be developed will in a certain sense be hypothetical. Nevertheless, the issues involved (and lessons learned) in its development will be generally applicable to any research or investigative project.

C. Learning outcomes:
1. Understand the need for, and role of, a framing methodology, theoretical framework, analytic approach, or equivalent epistemological stance towards any research or theoretical investigation.
2. Develop familiarity with a variety of methods and approaches used in contemporary information research.
3. Learn how to design and develop a research proposal in an area of contemporary importance in information research.
4. Recognize the impact of methods, frameworks, approaches, and analytic techniques on research investigations—by affecting the kinds of question that can be asked, the types of issue that are foregrounded and those that are related to the background or “disappeared,” the sorts of result that can be obtained, and the form of knowledge that can be produced.
5. Recognize the perils of placing prior allegiance on a method or methodology in advance of dispassionate consideration of the subject matter and issue to be addressed.
6. Develop skills in selecting one or more methods, theoretical frameworks, and/or analytic approaches in research design so as to “do justice to” what matters most about a topic under investigation.

III • Cases

We will use real-world case materials as a basis on which to assess the methods and concepts introduced in the course readings. Students will develop their own specific case, based on their own interests, that addresses an important information issue, as supported by academic and journalistic materials. Themes might include issues of intellectual property, surveillance, privacy, digital media and identity, transformations in labor or leisure, etc.

Some examples (for purposes of illustration only; you should choose a topic that you are interested in):

1. Information and Drones
2. Unpaid Social Media Labour
   — Cf. “They say it’s friendship. We say it’s unwaged work” (http://wagesforfacebook.com)
3. Monitoring social media at work
4. “Netflix: Goodbye Blockbusters”

1At least not as part of this course.
5. Digital rights management in computer games:

6. Privacy by Design

7. CCV Cameras in UK:
   — Cf. http://www.yourprivacy.co.uk/cctvsystems.html

8. Online identity and facebook:
   — Cf. http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/09_52/b4161092194568.htm

9. Personal Digital Archiving:

10. Privacy rights of the dead

IV • Assignments

Students will be graded on four items: their class participation and on-going development of case materials, over the course of the semester, and three assignments:

A. Case posting and class discussion
   Due ongoing — Worth 20%

   Each student is responsible for posting a link (or citation information) and providing a brief write-up on Blackboard (one paragraph or less) of found case materials by noon (12:00 p.m.) the day before each seminar,\(^2\) starting the 3rd week of class.\(^3\) The weekly case materials should connect to the relevant concept or methodology to be discussed in the following seminar. For example, if the discussion that week focuses on 'actor-network theory', then the chosen materials should be appropriate to this method and the write-up should highlight and describe the connection.

B. Assignment #1 — Case write-up
   Due Feb 24 (Week 6) — Worth 20%

   A narrative description of the case and its relevance (3-5 pages), due Feb 24 (week 6). This should include links to relevant documents and online sources, including ones described in class. A few points about cases (for more info see http://archive.tlt.psu.edu/suggestions/cases/).
   a. Topic or general area: The situation or issue with which the case is involved.
   b. Real-Word Scenario: Cases are generally based on real world situations, although some facts may be changed to simplify the scenario or "protect the innocent."
   c. Supporting Data and Documents: Effective cases typically involves real world artifacts for analysis. These can be simple data tables, links to real URL's, quoted statements or testimony, supporting documents, images, video, audio, or any appropriate material.
   d. Open-Ended Question/Problem: Most case are based on a general overarching (and often open-ended) question or problem, which may be subject to different interpretations, susceptible to multiple potential solutions, etc. (Multiple people or teams may investigate the same case and come up with widely varying “answers” or proposed solutions, etc.).

C. Assignment #2 — Draft Research proposal
   Due Mar 23 (Week 10) — Worth 20%

   A 2,500–3,000 word (10–12 page) draft of your research proposal is due by March 23 (week 10). This proposal should provide an outline or skeleton\(^4\) of the final Proposal, briefly describe your planned case, and list appropriate methods and concepts highlighted during the course.

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\(^1\)I.e., by 12:00 p.m. (noon) on Tuesday.

\(^2\)So the first posting should be on or before Jan 26.

\(^3\)See the Appendix (pp. 14–17) to the Writing Tips, at “Syllabus > INF2242 · Writing Tips” on Blackboard.
D. Assignment #3 — Final Research Proposal    Due April 15 (end of semester) — Worth 40%

A 4,000–5,000 word (20–25 page) final research proposal is due on April 15. It should include a
description of your case and its relevance, planned methods and useful concepts for addressing the
critical information issues described within, and include a bibliography of scholarly readings and
supporting case materials.

Additional information and/or details on assignments may be posted from time to time on Blackboard,
under ‘Course Materials.’

V.1 — Submission Requirements

1. All assignments should be submitted in Blackboard, formatted as follows:
   a. File format: .docx (preferred), .doc, .pdf, .rtf, .odt, or .txt
   b. Minimum 1.5” (4 cm) margins on all 4 sides
   c. 12 point font
   d. Student name and ID in the upper right corner of every page (no credit for unidentified pages!)

2. Citations must be in a consistent, recognized professional style.

3. Assignments must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. on the day they are due.5

V.2 — Late Assignments

1. Late assignments will be subjected to a penalty, unless:
   a. Prior arrangements have been made with the instructor, including agreement on a specific lat-
   er specific submission date; and
   b. Written medical documentation is provided at the time the assignment is submitted. U.of.T
   has recently changed its requirements for submission of medical documentation. The only
   form that is allowed to be considered is entitled “Verification of Student Illness or Injury.”6,7

2. Unless these requirements are met, penalties for late submission of any assignment will consist of a
   reduction of one grade point (A to A–, A– to B+, etc.) for every two days (including weekend days
   and holidays) after the assignment is due.

V.3 — Assignment Requirements

1. Pay careful attention to the quality of writing. Clarity, concision, and cogency are all highly valued,
   and will be included as grading criteria. Correct spelling and grammar are expected.

2. If you are having trouble with your English, please seek help early in the term. The Office of English
   Language and Writing Support (ELWS), at 63 Huron Street in the School of Graduate Studies, is de-
   signed to assist graduate students improve their oral and written communication skills. Visit the
   ELWS8 website for a list of classes, or call (416) 946-7314 for more information. In addition, familiar-
   ize yourself with the resources available at the U.of.T writing support web site.9

3. As a somewhat idiosyncratic addition to the above resources, I have also made available, on Black-
   board, a set of “Writing Tips,”10 to keep in mind while preparing your assignments.

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5Due to a peculiarity in Blackboard, anything posted at midnight will be recorded by Blackboard as having been submitted at
0:00 a.m. on the following date, and hence marked as late.
6http://www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca
7This new form replaces the former “Student Medical Certificate,” which is no longer accepted.
8http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/english
9http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/
10Available on Blackboard under “Syllabus > INF2242 · Writing Tips”.
V • Course Materials
A course website will be maintained on Blackboard. All required readings will be available on Blackboard. Other handouts and relevant materials will be posted when appropriate.

VI • Academic integrity
Honesty and fairness are considered fundamental values shared by students, staff and faculty at the University of Toronto. The essence of academic life revolves around fairness, the avoidance of cheating, and respect not only for the ideas of others, but also their rights to those ideas and their promulgation. In particular, it is essential the ideas and expressions of ideas of other people be handled and respectfully. In written assignments, when ideas or materials of others are used, they must be cited. Such attention to ideas and acknowledgment of their sources is central not only to academic life, but life in general.

Use of material by others without proper citation—called plagiarism—is absolutely forbidden, and considered to be a very grave academic offence. Please familiarize yourself with the U.of.T site How Not to Plagiarize, and with the U.of.T policy detailing all policies and procedures surrounding academic offenses: the U.of.T Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters.

Note that no U.of.T instructor has any discretion whatsoever in dealing with cases of plagiarism. All cases must be reported. This is a very strict U.of.T rule, to which we, as instructors, are bound. In particular, it is explicitly forbidden for any instructor to “decide charitably to let a confused or repentant student off,” no matter how much we might otherwise be tempted.

Note as well that citation is critical whether or not the cited passage or idea has been published. If you rely on an idea suggested by someone else (including another classmate, even at a coffee house or pub), make sure to cite the person and to give them full and appropriate credit (e.g.: Ebenezer Le Page, personal communication, Feb 30, 2016).

VII • Practical Stuff

A. Communication policy: Except in unusual circumstances, please do not email questions about the course directly to the instructor. If you have a question, there is a very good chance that others in the class will have the same question—or at least will benefit from the answer. Please therefore post all questions to Blackboard (in the appropriate forum on the “Discussion Board”) so that everyone in the class can benefit from your questions and from our answers. Questions posted to Blackboard will normally be answered within 24 hours (except on weekends and during reading week).

B. Withdrawal: Tuesday, March 1 is the final date to drop the courses without academic penalty.

C. Disabilities and Diverse Learning Styles: Students with disabilities, diverse learning styles, and/or needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please approach the instructor, the Faculty of Information Registrar, and/or the Accessibility Services Office as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know about your needs, the more quickly we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

11http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize
12http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm
13http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca/
VIII • Course Schedule

Jan 20 — Critical Information Systems, and an overview of STS and IS


Jan 27 — STS and IS: Key concepts


Feb 3 — Information, Knowledge, Practice


Feb 10 — Study of practice


Feb 24 — Methodologies: Ethnographic Approaches


Mar 2 — Methodologies: Content and Participant Approaches


Mar 9 — Concepts: Infrastructures


Mar 16 — Methods: Social Construction


Mar 23 — Concepts: Networks


Mar 30 — Methods: Laboratory and Community Studies


Apr 6 — Methods: Distributed Cognition


X — Activity Theory
