

INF 380C: Information in Social and Cultural Context

Unique number: 28180

University of Texas at Austin

Fall 2017

Dr. Amelia Acker

Course Information

Class day and time: Wednesdays, 12 pm – 3 pm

Class location UTA 1.208

Instructor Information

Instructor: Dr. Amelia Acker

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Telephone: 512-471-8487

Office hours: Tuesdays 3 – 4 pm (or by appointment)

Office location: 5.434

Teaching Assistant Information

Assistant: Kolina Koltai

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Office hours: by appointment

I. University Catalog Course Description

“Examines the role of information in human activities, particularly in relation to particular social and cultural contexts. Examines how individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and society at large create, find, use, understand, share, transform, and curate information.”

II. Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

This course examines the role that the concept of information as well as information professionals play in contemporary society and culture, focusing on ongoing debates of broad societal relevance. Specifically, these debates revolve around cultural heritage, privacy, social media, and serving communities.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- employ a common language and conceptual framework for connecting the diverse areas of specialization within the information field;
- critically examine the role of information in human activities as framed by social and cultural contexts;
- discuss the primary ways in which groups, organizations, and institutions employ information at micro and macro levels;
- delineate relationships among forms of information work

- engage in the reflective, critical inquiry essential to graduate level oral and written work
- take a stand on ongoing debates about information in social and cultural context.
- develop your skills in interpersonal communication and public speaking

III. Course format and procedures

This is a discussion-style course based on interactive [flipped classroom](#) pedagogical models, so attendance and participation in class are critical to individual success in this course and to the success of the course as a whole. You need to come to class prepared to participate in small group and full class discussions as well as to participate in debates, to complete all required readings prior to class, and to submit assignments on time.

During the first half of each class meeting (weeks 2-14), we will discuss the readings. Prior to each class, I will select discussion questions submitted by participants for us to discuss. First, the authors of the selected questions will read their discussion questions to the class. Next, you will work in small groups to discuss each question (working with a different small group each week). Finally, we will share insights from group discussions with the class. During the second half of each class meeting (weeks 2-14), we will hold group activities and debates revolving around an ongoing debate about the societal role of information related to the topic of the week. During the first few weeks (weeks 2-7), we will focus on small group activities focused on your group final project. For the rest of the semester (weeks 8-12), debates will be full-class activities modeled on town-hall debates, and you will alternate between taking one side or the other on the debate, serving as a moderator, or serving as an active member of the audience.

Our semester is divided into three modules on 1.) the epistemology of information conceptual frameworks, 2.) information's role in human activity, and 3.) information institutions and the nature of information work.

Course Readings/Materials

- All course readings are available on the course Canvas site.
- Please make sure to complete all readings before coming to class each week.
- You will need to do additional readings to prepare for each of your three assigned debates.
- You will need to follow the directions for the homework for week 2 and bring all assignments printed out to class unless otherwise noted.

IV. Course Requirements

Assignment overview

1. Class attendance and Participation (20%) every class
2. Critical reading response (10%), weeks 2-12
3. Small group letter to the author (10%), varies across weeks week 3-10
4. Discussion questions or artifacts (10%), weeks 2-8
5. Group Project Report & Presentation (25%)
 - Project proposal (0%), due 9/27
 - Individual report (10%), due 10/25
 - Group report (10%), due 11/29
 - Peer evaluation (0%), due 12/6
6. Debates (25%), varies across weeks 8-12
 - Debate preparation document due the Tuesday before assigned class date.

** Note: each unexcused absence will result in a 5-point deduction from final grade.*

Course at a glance

Week, Date	Topic	Note or Deadline
Week 1, Aug 30	Introduction	
Week 2, Sept 6	Understanding Information	Discussion artifacts
Week 3, Sept 13	Information models	Discussion artifacts
Week 4, Sept 20	IP/Standards	Discussion artifacts
Week 5, Sept 27	Personal Identity	Discussion artifacts + Project proposal due*
Week 6, Oct 4	Collective Identity	Discussion artifacts
Week 7, Oct 11	Boosting and Alarming	Discussion artifacts
Week 8, Oct 18	Diversity and Inclusion	Debates
Week 9, Oct 25	Social media as public space	Debates/Individual reports due*
Week 10, Nov 1	Digital cultural memory	Debates
Week 11, Nov 8	Social impacts of design	Debates
Week 12, Nov 15	Professional roles	Debates
Week 13, Nov 23	Thanksgiving holiday	NO CLASS*
Week 14, Nov 29	Conclusions	Group report due*
Week 15, Dec 6		Group presentations*

*** Denotes an assignment due date or important in-class session.**

Class Attendance and Participation (20%), every class

- Because the vast majority of the learning in this class will occur within the classroom, you are required to attend class regularly. Attendance will be taken during each class period. Absences will only be excused in situations following university policy (illness, religious holy days, participation in University activities at the request of university authorities, and compelling absences beyond your control) with proper documentation and timely notification (prior to class for non-emergencies). By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, I will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence. Excessive tardiness may be considered as an unexcused absence except in situations following university policy.
- Class participation is a critical element of this course. The effectiveness of the course will be significantly impacted by the quality of your participation. Class participation is not merely attendance, but rather factors in your overall contributions to the collaborative learning environment, based on both the quantity and quality of your interactions in all aspects of the course. Discussion of class participation with the instructor is encouraged in order to ensure that you are making the most of the classroom experience and the accompanying opportunities for learning. You are expected to participate in all aspects of class discussion. You should come to class prepared to discuss the required readings, as well as your perspectives on these readings. You should strive for balance in your contributions, and your participation will not be based on who speaks the loudest or the longest, but on consistent participation of significant quantity and, most importantly, quality.
- Your attendance and class participation grade will be calculated by multiplying the numerical assessment of your class participation by the percentage of classes that you attend (with exceptions made for documented, university-recognized absences as noted above). Regular attendance and active participation in each class session are critical for receiving a good grade in this course. For example, if you actively participate in each class meeting, you will receive a full letter grade higher than if you were to skip half of the classes or to be half-awake for all of the classes.

How attendance is documented:

At the beginning of each class I'll hand out blank index cards. During the class make brief notes regarding 3-4 of your major participation actions; print your name and date on each card. At the end of each class drop off the card to me.

Your comments should be informal phrases rather than formal statements. Just become aware of how you bring your ideas and insights into discussions and activities.

Examples include:

- Questioned accuracy of a reading
- Gave an example

- Helped present my group's ideas
- Supported a colleague's effort to speak up
- Explained something in a reading
- Challenged an assumption

Critical reading response (10%), weeks 2-12

In weeks 2-12 you will post your own response to the readings for that week and read the responses of the others in your group before class.

Before class write a 100-250 word response to the readings, that synthesizes either all of the readings as a whole or individual readings separately. Clear and properly proofed writing is important but put your focus on analysis and context. Approaches may include:

- questioning how an idea or assumption plays out in a different social and/or cultural context
- identifying themes or keywords that were used across the readings
- questioning the author's premise or assumption
- describing your concerns about the method or approach
- explaining how the reading (or readings) made you think of the context of information in a new way
- explanation of your own experience with some aspect of a reading (or readings)

Before class, read and reflect on the postings of others in your group. Your understanding of your group's postings is essential to everyone's conversations about each day's ideas. To maximize everyone's posting, individuals might be called on to briefly share a summary of the group's postings with the class as a whole or as part of an in-class activity.

Small group letter to the author (10%), varies across weeks week 3-10

At some point during weeks 3-10 your small group will be assigned a time to write a letter to an author that we have read in class and provide critical feedback, praise, or questions about their work.

Consider the analysis, discussions, and responses to your date's readings. Discuss them among your group until you reach a consensus on the basic content of your letter. These letters are intended to engage with authors, to animate them, and to synthesize your group's response to their work in a critical, generous, structured concise genre. In whatever way your group finds most effective, compose the letter (probably collaborating on Google Docs). In addition to basic proofing, review the letter's professional nature. In the week following your designated date, we will workshop the letter in class. Have someone read the letter to the class. Have someone take notes on the class feedback. If needed, revise the letter, print, and sign it. I will mail the letter right away so there is time for any correspondent's response you might get.

Discussion questions or artifacts (10%), weeks 2-8

Each week, you will post a discussion question or artifact that addresses a theme that spans all three readings for the week (Weeks 2-8). To receive full credit, you must explicitly refer to and synthesize all three readings for the given week. Connecting with earlier weeks is strongly encouraged when appropriate, however please do make sure to still discuss each of the readings for the current week as well. Prior to coming to class, you should examine your colleagues' questions and be prepared to discuss them in class. You will be graded on your ability to refer to and synthesize all three readings and to provide an insightful perspective on the three readings through your intellectual curiosity. **Discussion questions are due by Monday at noon.** Be prepared to share your insights with the class.

Practically anything in digital format that pertains to the readings can serve as an artifact. It can be funny or provocative, but be sure to establish a clear link to the readings so that people can react, analyze, and interrogate the object and its context. Showing and explaining the artifact should take about 10 minutes. Possibilities include the following:

- a current event in the news
- a listserv email chain
- a podcast episode
- a YouTube video
- a meme
- a Facebook event
- a professional or social meet-up
- a photograph
- an app

We'll address discussion questions and artifacts, submitting them and voting on them in small groups in week 2.*

Group Project Report & Presentation (25%)

Throughout the term you will work on creating an environmental scan of an institution's or community organization's information activities that serves people by providing them some kind of information or experience. This environmental scan project gives your group the opportunity to tackle questions concerning equity in information services, social and professional ethics, diversity in the information workforce, issues of accessibility, cross-cultural communication, and much more.

An environmental scan is a substantial description and brief evaluation of all the information activities undertaken by an institution or organization. Elements typically include descriptions (not copies) of the institution's or organization's more critical relationships within and without. Typical elements for each institution or organization include:

- Purpose
- Staff hierarchy
- Internal information pathways, gatekeepers, barriers, & supports
- Staff positions which have access to different kinds/levels of information
- Internal documents or meetings that address different kinds/levels of information (e.g., mission statement, standards, job descriptions, newsletters, monthly staff meetings, irregular or informal meetings)
- External information purpose(s)
- External audience(s) for whom information is created/presented
- Mechanisms for putting out external information (e.g., news media interviews, interactive web site, blog)
- Means of inviting information needs and feedback from outsiders
- Other elements that are particularly significant in an individual institutional or organizational information environment

Evaluation of the information environment is determined from the perspective of the institutional or organizational. Identify what they intend/want to do then evaluate how well they did so. Do *not* alter their purpose. Look at what they intend to do rather than what you'd like them to do. Typical elements of an evaluation include:

- Comparison of intention with outcome
- Explanations of apparently useful and failed information elements
- Explanations of socio-cultural and social justice information activities and gaps
- Suggestions for means of more effectively meeting information goals
- Other elements that are particularly significant in an individual institutional or organizational information environment

The timeline and weight for each of the 4 elements of this project are listed below. Each one will be explained and discussed in class, when appropriate or requested, throughout the semester. The parts of the environmental scan and their due dates:

- Project proposal (0%), due 9/27
- Individual report (10%), due 10/25
- Group report (10%), due 11/29
- Peer evaluation (0%), due 12/6

Debates (25%), varies across weeks 8-12

One of the important skills of an information professional is to understand the societal impact of information, by considering how information fits into its social and cultural context. As an information professional, you need to be able to see all sides of an issue, and you may need to take a stand to defend a particular perspective on the role of information in society. You will be assigned a debate topics, spread across weeks 8-12 of the class. One of these weeks, you will argue the pro position. One of these weeks, you will argue the con position. Finally, one of these weeks, you will serve as a moderator. During the remaining weeks, you will still play an active role as a member of the audience in the town hall-style debate, and your debate participation will be part of

your overall participation grade (as in the case of the second unit, where participation in any role in practice debates will count toward your overall participation grade). Debates will be broken into segments. First, both sides will deliver opening statements (up to 1 minute per side). Next, moderators will ask questions of either or both sides. After that, audience members will have opportunities to ask questions of either or both sides (answers are limited to up to 1 minute per side). Then, both sides will deliver closing statements (up to 1 minute per side). Finally, we will step out of character to discuss what we learned from the debate. Each member of the assigned debating teams and moderators must actively participate in a speaking role.

Effective debating requires significant preparation, and as an information professional, you will need to be able to bring yourself up to speed on important ongoing issues relating to information in its social and cultural context. As a practice exercise, prior to serving as a debater or moderator during the assigned weeks, you will need to submit a debate preparation with at least one page of research completed as part of your preparation for the debate, including at least three outside references beyond the class syllabus. You have a great deal of flexibility in the format of this page, which could take the form of a one-page report, a set of points and counterpoints based on the readings, or any written preparation that will assist you in participating in the debate, provided you make sure to cite three outside readings. However, moderators' preparations must include at least three questions (one for pro, one for con, and one for both).

Your debate preparation document due the Tuesday before assigned class date.

Each of the assignments will have descriptions and evaluation rubrics posted to the course Canvas website in the Assignment section by the beginning of week 3.

Grading Scale

This class employs a plus/minus grading system. For more information on this system, please consult the University's *General Information Catalog*. Below is the grade scale the University employs and which will be used in this class:

Meets major requirement		Does not meet requirement	
Grade	Points	Grade	Points
A	≥93.00	C-	70.00-72.99
A-	90.00-92.99	D+	67.00-69.99
B+	87.00-89.99	D	63.00-66.99
B	83.00-86.99	D-	60.00-62.99
B-	80.00-82.99	F	<60.00
C+	77.00-79.99		
C	73.00-76.99		

V. Course Policies

You are responsible for reading and following these course policies.

Instructor Communication: E-mail is the official mode of communication for the university and the most reliable means of contact for me. It is always helpful if your e-mail includes a targeted subject line that begins with "INF 385T." *Do not use the messaging facilities in Canvas; these messages do not arrive in my e-mail inbox.* Please allow a 24-hour window for email responses and plan accordingly. Please limit emails to 5 sentences or less. If your query about a reading or an assignment for the class takes more than 5 sentences to express, please come see me face to face in office hours. If you do not receive a sufficient answer to a question in more than one follow-up email (that is, a total of 2 personal emails from me) about the same question, please come meet with me. If you cannot make office hours, please email me to arrange an appointment. These policies are based on my belief in the sanctity and value of high-bandwidth communication (that is, face to face conversations).

Classroom Etiquette: Please come on time to class prepared, bringing soft or hard copies of readings for reference; bring appropriate tools for writing and note taking. Bring personal machines powered up, or plug them in before class begins, silence phones. Small snacks and drinks are welcome but meals are not.

Copyright Notice: These materials may be protected by copyright. United States copyright law, 17 USC section 101, et seq., in addition to University policy and procedures, prohibit unauthorized duplication or retransmission of course materials.

Statement on Classroom Recording: To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

On original work: cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. If an assignment turned in for credit is found to have been plagiarized, you will receive a grade of 0 points and a formal reprimand in your student file. You will be subject to the University's disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course.

Late assignments: *I do not accept late assignments.* Students who anticipate difficulties with completing assignments on time should consult with the instructor as soon as possible so that alternate solutions can be discussed. When negotiated in advance, arrangements can often be made.

Style manual: Please use the American Psychological Association's [style manual](#). In particular, please be sure to follow its citation formats and rules on language bias.

Gun policy: Please ask me about my policy on guns in my office.

VI. University Policies

You are responsible for reading and following these University policies.

Religious holy days: A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

Use of E-mail for Official Correspondence: All students should become familiar with the University's official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in his or her e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. It is recommended that e-mail be checked daily, but at a minimum, twice per week. The complete text of this policy and instructions for updating your e-mail address are available at <http://www.utexas.edu/its/help/utmail/1564>

Documented Disability Statement: You will need to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office so the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities (SSB 4.104, 471-6259). Any student who requires special accommodations must obtain a letter that documents the disability from the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (471-6259 voice or 471- 4641 TTY for users who are deaf or hard of hearing). Present the letter to the professor at the beginning of the semester so that needed accommodations can be discussed. The student should remind the professor of any testing accommodations no later than five business days before an exam. If you plan to make use of specialized services through SSD please inform me before the second class meeting. For more information, visit <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

VII. University Resources for Students

The university has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning, use these to help you succeed in your classes

The University Writing Center

The University Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster students' resourcefulness and self-reliance. <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling and Mental Health Center

The Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) provides counseling, psychiatric, consultation, and prevention services that facilitate students' academic and life goals and enhance their personal growth and well-being. <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>

Student Emergency Services

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

ITS

Need help with technology? <http://www.utexas.edu/its/>

Libraries

Need help searching for information? <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>

Canvas

Canvas help is available 24/7 at

<https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/student-tutorials>

VIII. Important Safety Information

Behavior Concerns Advice Line (BCAL): If you are worried about someone who is acting differently, you may use the Behavior Concerns Advice Line to discuss by phone your concerns about another individual's behavior. This service is provided through a partnership among the Office of the Dean of Students, the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC), the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and The University of Texas Police Department (UTPD). Call 512-232-5050 or visit <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal>.

Emergency Evacuation Policy: Occupants of buildings on the UT Austin campus are required to evacuate and assemble outside when a fire alarm is activated or an announcement is made. Please be aware of the following policies regarding evacuation:

- Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of the classroom and the building. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when you entered the building.
- If you require assistance to evacuate, inform me in writing during the first week of class.
- In the event of an evacuation, follow my instructions or those of class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless you are given instructions by the Austin Fire Department, the UT Austin Police Department, or the Fire Prevention Services office.

Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty: Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Student Judicial Services web site at <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/>

University of Texas Core Values and Honor Code: The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community. As a student of the University of Texas at Austin, I shall abide by the core values of the University and uphold academic integrity.

IX. Abridged reading and assignment schedule for the first unit

Full reading schedule will be posted on the course website by the end of week 2, this will be the first month's topics, assignments, and readings.

Unit 1: Epistemology of information

Week 1, August 30: Introduction

Topics: course structure, conceptual overview, canvas, participation & reading response expectations, form small groups

Assignments due: small group assignments in class, send Dr. Acker an email of your small group of 4-5 people.

Week 2, September 6:

Topics: Understanding information, information literacy, group project expectations

Readings:

- Buckland, M. K. (1991). Information as thing. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science (1986-1998)*, 42(5), 351.
PDF available on course website, labeled "Buckland 1".
- Buckland letter to the editor and rejoinder.
PDF available on course website, labeled "Buckland 2".
- Case, D.O. (2016). Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior. San Diego: Academic Press.
Chapter 4: The concept of information, pp. 40-64.
Chapter 6: Related concepts, pp. 80-113.
PDFs available on course website, labeled "Case 4", "Case 6".

Assignments due: Discussion artifact (bring to class to learn how to post to canvas);
Participation card (due at the end of class)

Week 3, September 13:

Topics: Information engagement models, expectations for small group letter to author

Readings:

- Agarwall, N. (2015). Towards a definition of serendipity in information behaviour. *Information Research*, 20(3), 1–16.
<http://doi.org/10.1016/i.bandc.2008.07.009>.
PDF available on course website.
- Case, D.O. (2002). Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior. San Diego: Academic Press.
Chapter 7: Models of Information Behavior, pp. 133-162.
PDF available on course website, labeled “Case 7”.
- Wilson, T. D. (1999). Models in information behaviour research. *Journal of Documentation*, 55(3), 249–270.
PDF available on course website.

Assignments due: Discussion artifact (post to Canvas by Monday 12 noon); Participation card (due at the end of class)

Week 4, September 20:

Topics: Intellectual Property/Standards; debate expectations and assignments, small group proposal discussion

Readings:

- Star, S.L. & Lampland, M. (2009). Reckoning with standards. In M. Lampland & S.L. Star (Eds.), *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life* (pp. 3-34). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
PDF available on course website.
- Mokhtar, U. A., & Yusof, Z. M. (2015). Classification: The understudied concept. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(2), 176–182.
<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.12.002>
PDF available on course website.
- Olson, H. A. (2007). How we construct subjects: A feminist analysis. *Library Trends*, 56, 509-541.
PDF available on course website.

Assignments due: Discussion artifact (post to Canvas by Monday 12 noon); Participation card (due at the end of class)