

**The University of Western Ontario  
Faculty of Information and Media Studies**

***FIMS 9137 –Information Ethics***  
**Mondays, 9:30– 11:30, FNB 2230**

**Course Outline – Fall 2021**  
**DRAFT: 8.18.21**

**Instructor Information**

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**Course Description**

This course investigates the ethical aspects of contemporary information technology and information practices. Through lectures, readings, in-class discussion, and group and independent projects, we will analyze and engage challenges ranging from privacy in big data, freedom of expression in social computing environments, platforms and politics, diversity and the digital divide, and the nature of disruption, innovation, property, access and collaboration in an increasingly networked world, as well as the role of various professional codes of ethics. The course draws on diverse cases from the fields of library and information science, media and communication studies, and organizational science as well as your experiences as a user, consumer, practitioner, and participant in the information world. In this course you'll learn key theories, methods, frameworks, laws, and institutions that govern, shape, and inform information technology. You'll develop and refine core analytic, writing and presentation skills, in individual and group contexts, central to success in virtually all organizational settings. You'll also critically and strategically engage with values trade-offs in the worlds of information and technology around you, enabling you to better choose what kind of information consumer, user, citizen, and professional you want to be.

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in the MLIS program, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.

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

1. Understand and critically assess key ethics-related principles, concepts, theories, and/or philosophies (historical and/or contemporary, Western and/or non-Western, derived from philosophy, law, etc.) (program-level learning outcome 1, 2, 3, 4, 5);
2. Cultivate leadership potential by recognizing, analyzing, and considering strategies to address the complex nature of ethical issues in the information field (program-level learning outcome 2, 3, 5, 7, 9);
3. Apply ethical frameworks across multiple scales (e.g. self, group) and diverse contexts (e.g. geographic, cultural, institutional, and governmental) (program-level learning outcome 1, 2, 3, 5, 8);
4. Understand how professional codes of ethics relate to ethical principles, concepts, issues, and/or philosophies underpinning the preservation and communication of information via emerging technologies (program-level learning outcome 1, 3, 5, 7);
5. Communicate ethical issues analysis clearly, concisely, and persuasively, using both written (e.g. case studies, briefs) and verbal (e.g. presentations) methods (program-level learning outcome 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9)

**Course website: <https://owl.uwo.ca>. The courses you're registered for should appear as soon as you log in.**

**Course Materials**

All required readings are available online [via OWL, Western Libraries or the World Wide Web] or are on reserve in GRC.

## Course Policies

**Email correspondence:** Please include “Info Ethics” in the subject line for all emails related to this course! Barring unforeseen issues, I respond to all emails within 48 hours.

**Respect and collegiality:** I am committed to the idea of the classroom as a place for respectful engagement across difference, and a chance to learn from colleagues from a variety of backgrounds and value systems. (This is especially important in a class built substantially around questions of ethics!) Students are expected to behave collegially and professionally at all times.

**Attendance & Participation:** Attendance at and timely arrival to all classes is required and will be monitored each class. See the MLIS Student Handbook for details. Students needing to negotiate legitimate absences need to inform the instructor in advance in order to arrange for make-up work. In case of emergency absences, students must contact the instructor as soon as possible afterwards. Students should expect absence or lateness without permission or legitimate explanation to be reflected in their participation grade. Each student is permitted one unexplained, unexcused absence. While using this “free pass” will not reduce your participation grade it might negatively impact your understanding of key concepts and expectations that were covered that day so please make arrangements with a colleague to get notes, etc. MLIS guidelines for participation are available at [http://intra.fims.uwo.ca/students/handbooks/mlis/mlis-handbook-04.htm#P251\\_25303](http://intra.fims.uwo.ca/students/handbooks/mlis/mlis-handbook-04.htm#P251_25303)

**Academic Integrity:** Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:  
[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

**Assignment submission:** Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due at the beginning of class in the week they are due per the course syllabus. Please make sure that all written assignments are clearly labeled with the course name and number, assignment title, instructor’s name, your name and date. While there is no official style manual for this course, please make sure that you choose and consistently use a style that is appropriate to the assignments required in this course. Poor grammar, style or spelling will result in a lower grade. Except in cases of excused absences, late assignments will be reduced at the rate of 5% per day or part thereof. Assignments that are 7 or more days late will not be accepted.

**Grade Guidelines:** For the grading guidelines, please see the FIMS student handbook

**Academic Accommodation:** Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

Western University and FIMS policies on accommodation are as follows:

**Medical Accommodation:** For Western University policy on accommodation for medical illness, see:  
[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/accommodation\\_medical.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf)

Student Medical Certificate (SMC): [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf)

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or **assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade** must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. It will be the Dean's Office that will determine if accommodation is warranted.

For **work worth less than 10% of the final grade**, the instructor will consider requests for academic accommodation on medical grounds made in a timely manner in writing or by appointment in office hours. Such requests need not be accompanied by documentation. The instructor may, however, decide to require documentation be submitted to the appropriate Academic Counselling office.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for accommodation on medical grounds, or for other reasons. All documentation must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's home Faculty.

Compassionate Accommodation: Academic accommodation (extensions, makeup tests and exams, additional assignments etc.) may be given to students on compassionate grounds. The situations for which compassionate accommodation can be given must be serious, including significant events such as death in the immediate family, trauma (fire, robbery, harassment, muggings, car accidents, etc.), or emergency situations. Documentation is required.

Religious Accommodation: Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. <http://multiculturalcalendar.com/ecal/index.php?s=c-univwo> Further specific information is given in the Western Academic Calendar.

### **Support Services**

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwo.com/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Other support services on campus:

**Office of the Registrar:** [www.registrar.uwo.ca](http://www.registrar.uwo.ca)

**Student Development Centre:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca)

**Psychological Services:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca/psych](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/psych)

**Services for Students with Disabilities:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd)

**Accessibility Information:** [www.accessibility.uwo.ca/](http://www.accessibility.uwo.ca/)

**Writing Support Centre:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing)

**Learning Skills Services:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning)

**Indigenous Services:** [www.indigenous.uwo.ca/](http://www.indigenous.uwo.ca/)

**International and Exchange Student Centre:** [www.sdc.uwo.ca/int](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/int)

**Career Centre at Western:** [www.success.uwo.ca/careers/](http://www.success.uwo.ca/careers/)

**Office of the Ombudsperson:** <http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/>

### **Methods of Evaluation**

- |                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| • Lead Class Discussion (sign-up) | 20% |
| • Reflection Paper                | 15% |
| • Final Project                   | 55% |
| • Participation                   | 10% |

### **Lead Class Discussion –20%**

Each student will lead one class discussion. Lead discussants are expected to have done a close read of the assigned readings and any other materials. Discussants will present summaries of the key findings and arguments of the readings to the class (slides and/or handouts optional), synthesize concepts between or among readings, and prepare discussion questions and/or an in-class activity exploring key themes for the week. Students sign up for their week in advance. I will post a sign-up sheet during the first class (and additional classes as needed). Topic selection is first-come, first-served; a sign-up sheet will be circulated during the first class. Aim for 45 minutes maximum, including discussion and/or activity.

**The lead discussant must email me their materials (e.g. notes, slides, questions, description of the in-class activity) by noon on the day before you are “on” so that I may review them and post them to OWL.** You are encouraged, but not required, to coordinate with me in the preparation of your materials. *This assignment will be graded based upon: 1) how effectively, thoroughly, critically, and concisely the group presents summaries of the core concepts, findings, and arguments of the readings, 2) how well you are able to synthesize and emphasize core concepts across readings, 3) the engagement, creativity, and effectiveness of the discussion questions and/or in-class activity. The grade for this assignment is a group grade and all members receive the same score.*

### **Reflection Paper – 15%**

Students will complete one reflection paper (2 single spaced pages) tied to a key substantive ethical interest of the course. A specific prompt for the assignment will be provided as the date approaches. You should come to class prepared to discuss your reflections.

### **Research Project – 55% [each milestone is worth 5%, presentation is worth 10%, report is worth 30%]**

Working individually or in pairs, you will conduct an original research project on an information ethics topic of your choosing. Ideally, you should engage with a topic that is interesting and relevant to your experience and/or your current or future professional work. I encourage you to begin this project ASAP, brainstorm topics, and schedule a meeting(s) with me to discuss your chosen topic and research approach in advance. I encourage you to consider how you might use this work beyond the classroom by presenting it at a conference or other public forum or through publication. The main deliverables for this assignment are as follows:

- *Milestones:*
  - I. *Topic selection and brief proposal:* In no more than one page, tell me what you’re interested in studying, why it’s important, what specific research question you hope to answer, and how you will go about gathering and analyzing the data necessary to answer it. This is a starting off point; it doesn’t need to be perfect. After submitting your proposal you will have a one-on-one meeting with me to discuss your ideas and modifications. **Due by the start of class, Oct. 4, 2021.**
  - II. *First draft:* You will prepare first draft of your paper which will then be shared for peer-review. Submit via email attachment, .doc or .odt file, to me and your peer-reviewers (who will be assigned to you). **Due by the start of class, Nov. 15, 2021.**
  - III. *Peer review:* Provide feedback on other students’ draft papers. I will group students into peer review groups based on enrolment. Send your peer reviews to the author and the instructor. **Due by the start of class, Nov. 29, 2021.**
  
- *Presentation:* **Due in our last class, Dec. 13, 2021.**
  
- *Final Paper:* The final report (10 single-spaced pages excluding references saved in .doc or .odt format) is **due by 11:55pm on Dec. 15, 2021.**

### **Participation – 10%**

Your participation grade will be determined by your contribution to the learning of the class. The evaluation will be based not only on how frequently you speak in class, but more importantly, by the quality of what you say and how well you listen and respond to others.

High-quality contributions include: starting a class discussion with sound analysis, synthesizing class discussions, summarizing and moving class discussions ahead, giving constructive criticisms or building on others’ ideas, substantiating one’s views persuasively and logically, responding to others’ critiques with reasoned rebuttal, graceful acceptance of new ideas, presenting well thought-out analyses and policy recommendations, volunteering for special role-playing or presentations, recalling and sharing relevant experiences, being respectful and non-judgmental towards your classmates’ opinions, asking thoughtful questions during lectures and peer presentations. Respect for the course and each other are essential.

Some contribution/partial credit: attending class and participating but contributions do not meet the threshold of “high-quality” as described above.

Unsatisfactory contributions include: being absent from class without excuse, attending class but not participating in plenary or group discussions, being unprepared for class, seeming to have not read the assigned readings, using technology for activities unrelated to class, offering poorly thought-out analyses or policy recommendations, personally criticizing classmates or demeaning the perspectives of others, being close-minded, disrespectful, or otherwise disruptive. These behaviors will lead to negative contribution grades.

### Topics and Weekly Schedule:

Note: readings up to and including week 4 are stable, beyond week 4 some readings may change. If you plan to read far ahead please check with me first.

Week	Date	Lecture	Lead Discussant	Due
1	Sept. 13	Overview	none	
2	Sept. 20	Foundations of Ethics & Critical Thinking		
3	Sept. 27	New Challenges		Reflection paper due
4	Oct. 4	Choice Architecture		Milestone 1 due
5	Oct. 18	Copyright		
6	Oct. 25	Repair		
7	Nov. 8	Hacking	none	
8	Nov. 15	Social Media		Milestone 2 due
9	Nov. 22	Big Data		
10	Nov. 29	Privacy		Milestone 3 due
11	Dec. 6	Equity, Diversity, Inclusion		
12	Dec. 13	Final Presentations	none	Final presentations due in class. Final papers due on Dec. 15

Note: There will be no classes held the week of October 11-15 and November 1-5. Assigned readings are:

#### 1. Introduction & Overview

- a. Assigned readings: None

#### 2. Foundations of Ethics and Critical Thinking

- a. Assigned readings:
  - i. Quinn, Michael J. *Ethics for the Information Age* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2014. Chapter 2.
  - ii. Nosich, Gerald M. *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson, 2012. Chapter 1.
  - iii. SKIM: Huss, Brian. *Everyday Ethics and Critical Thinking*, pp. 193-214.

#### 3. New Challenges

- a. Assigned readings:
  - i. Moor, James H. "Why we need better ethics for emerging technologies." *Ethics and Information Technology* 7.3 (2005): 111-119.
  - ii. Brey, Philip. "Values in technology and disclosive computer ethics." In Luciano Floridi (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, 2010. Chapter 3, pp. 41-58.
  - iii. Van den Hoven, Jeroen. "The use of normative theories in computer ethics." In Luciano Floridi (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, 2010. Chapter 4, pp. 59-76.
  - iv. SKIM: Watson (Tow Center for Digital Journalism), *Constructive Technology Criticism*: [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/constructive\\_technology\\_criticism.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/constructive_technology_criticism.php)

- b. Reflection Paper due – upload to OWL before class and be prepared to discuss your reflections in class.

#### 4. Choice Architecture

- a. Assigned Readings:
  - i. Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. Knopf, 2016. Chapters 25 & 26, pp. 308-327.
  - ii. Thaler Richard, H., & Sunstein Cass, R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Chapter 5, pp. 83-102.
  - iii. Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan. Chapters 1 & 2, pp. 19-38.
- b. Milestone 1 due

#### 5. Copyright

- a. Assigned Readings:
  - i. Perzanowski, Aaron, and Jason Schultz. *The end of ownership: Personal property in the digital economy*. MIT Press, 2016. Chapter 2: Property and the Exhaustion Principle.
  - ii. Perzanowski, Aaron, and Jason Schultz. *The end of ownership: Personal property in the digital economy*. MIT Press, 2016. Chapter 6: The Promise and Perils of Digital Libraries
  - iii. Bodó, Balázs. "Libraries in the post-scarcity era." (2015).

#### 6. Repair

- a. Assigned readings:
  - i. TBD
  - ii. TBD
  - iii. TBD

#### 7. Hacking and Hacktivism

- a. In-class screening of “The Internet’s Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz.”
- b. Assigned readings: None

#### 8. Social Media

- a. Assigned readings:
  - i. Bergstrom, Kelly. ““Don’t feed the troll”: Shutting down debate about community expectations on Reddit.com.” *First Monday* 16.8 (2011).
  - ii. Matias, J. N., Johnson, A., Boesel, W. E., Keegan, B., Friedman, J., & DeTar, C. (2015). Reporting, Reviewing, and Responding to Harassment on Twitter. *Women, Action, and the Media*. May 13, 2015. <http://womenactionmedia.org/twitter-report>
  - iii. TBD
- b. Milestone 2 due

#### 9. Big Data

- a. Assigned Readings:
  - i. Pasquale, Frank. *The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Harvard University Press, 2015. Chapter 2, pp. 19-58.
  - ii. Jurgenson, N. “The View from Nowhere.” *The New Inquiry*. (2014). <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/view-from-nowhere/>
  - iii. SKIM: Gillespie, Tarleton. “The relevance of algorithms.” In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

#### 10. Privacy

- a. Assigned Readings:
  - i. Brunton, Finn, and Helen Nissenbaum. *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*. MIT Press, 2015. Chapter II, pp. 45-95.

- ii. Mulligan, Deirdre K., Colin Koopman, and Nick Doty. "Privacy is an essentially contested concept: a multi-dimensional analytic for mapping privacy." *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A* 374.2083 (2016): 20160118.
  - iii. TBD
- b. Milestone 3 due

## **11. Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion**

- a. Assigned readings:
  - i. TBD
  - ii. TBD
  - iii. TBD

## **12. Final Project Presentations**

*Our time will be devoted to presentations of final projects. No assigned readings. Final presentations are due in class. Final papers are due, via OWL, on Dec. 15.*