

## **Planet Google: Big Data and the Information Society**

MIT 2157B

The University of Western Ontario

Faculty of Information & Media Studies

Winter 2020

Lectures: Tuesdays 9:30-11:30 & Thursdays 9:30-10:30 in FNB 114

### **COURSE INSTRUCTOR:**

Zak Bronson

Office Hours: Thursdays, 10:30am-12:00 in FNB 4018

Email: zbronson@uwo.ca

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Discover how access to and control of behind-the-scenes information is a major force in our lives. This course explores how search engines harvest “big” data from users and use it to map, analyze, and exploit patterns of online behaviour for marketing, government and corporate intelligence, and other purposes.

By taking this course, students will:

- Comprehend the theoretical principles that underlie key concepts of large-scale data systems, including algorithms, predictive analytics, linked data, and metadata
- Recognize key continuities and differences between the various paradigms of data that prevail in modern technological discourse, and to place these paradigms in an historical and social context
- Critically engage with statements in the popular and professional media related to big data, and in so doing distinguish fact from fiction, and truth from hype
- Communicate both their understanding and their critical engagement to organizations and individuals that would benefit from this knowledge, and be in a position to reward it

### **REQUIRED COURSE READINGS:**

Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction*. New York: Broadway, 2016. [**available at UWO bookstore**]

All other course readings and additional materials will be available through the course OWL page.

### **COURSE EVALUATION:**

1. Midterm Exam = 25% (in class Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>)
2. Written Reflection Paper = 25% (due in class April 2nd)
3. Final Exam = 35%
4. In-class Participation = 15% (ongoing)

## **COURSE ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS:**

1. **Midterm Exam – 25% (in-class Tuesday, Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>):** During Week 6, students will write a 2-hour in-class midterm on the course readings and lecture materials. The exam will cover the course material from Weeks 1-5 and will likely feature multiple choice, short answer, definition, and long answer questions. More information on the exam format will be provided in class prior to the midterm date.
2. **Final Exam – 35%:** The final exam is comprehensive, but it will be weighted towards the material from the second half of the course. In addition to multiple choice, short answer, and short essay questions, the final exam will also feature a longer essay response based on the course content.
3. **Short Reflection Paper – 25% (due in-class Thursday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>):** For this assignment, students will be asked to examine their digital footprint through online profiles such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and LinkedIn. Based on this information, students will be asked to write a 4-5-page reflection paper that responds to a series of outlined questions. Details on the specific guidelines of the assignment will be provided in class.
4. **In-Class Participation – 15% (ongoing):** Participation and discussion are an essential element of the learning process, and students will be provided with many opportunities to contribute their thoughts and opinions in lecture, group activities, and class discussion facilitations. Students will be graded on the strength and quality of their in-class contributions.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

- a) To gain an understanding of large-scale data systems in their practical, theoretical, historical, social and cultural contexts (MIT Objective 1)
- b) To gain an understanding of the processes and institutions involved in disseminating information, entertainment, and knowledge through big data technologies and services (MIT Objective 6)
- c) To explore the connections between the control of big data technologies and democracy, the public sphere, capital accumulation, labour and occupations, and the environment (MIT Objective 6).

## **COURSE POLICIES:**

**Email:** Before you email me, please check the course syllabus for the answer to your questions. In general, I will attempt to check my email at least once a day, however, please note that responses often take 24-36 hours for a response. I also ask that students who have more in-depth questions come to visit me during my office hours.

**Late Policy:** All assignments are due at the start of class on the assigned date. Late assignments will be deducted 5% per day, unless the student has documented medical or family emergency. Late essays must be submitted via the FIMS dropbox outside the FIMS Dean's Office (FNB

2050). Essays will be date stamped; if they are received after 4:30 pm on Friday they will be stamped with Monday's date.

**Use of Electronic Devices:** Laptops are allowed for note-taking and in-class research. If a student is found using laptops for non-course work or is being generally disruptive to the class, I reserve the right to have their use banned. All cell phones must be put away during class time. Students may be asked to put away their laptops at certain times in the class, such as seminar discussions.

**Attendance:** Since much of your participation grade is dedicated to your seminar discussions, group activities, and in-class contributions, it is necessary to attend course lectures and to regularly contribute to receive a strong participation grade.

**Readings:** Make sure that you have completed the readings before class. Keep in mind that class discussions depend on your participation and contribution, so closely read the assigned articles and be prepared to discuss them in class.

**Grading:** Students will receive graded work worth no less than 15% at least 3 days prior to the deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty. This year, the date by which students are to have received at least 15% of their grade in a first semester course is March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Students can find details about this academic policy here:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/exam/evaluation\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/evaluation_undergrad.pdf). Please note, students are responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the grades they have received in their courses.

**Land Acknowledgement:** Western University is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lunaapeewak and Attawandaron peoples who have longstanding relationships to the land and region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nation communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

**CLASS SCHEDULE:****WEEK 1—Jan. 7 & 9—WELCOME TO PLANET GOOGLE**

Reading: Cathy O’Neil, *WMD* “Introduction”

& Oscar Schwartz, “Don’t Look Now: Why You Should be Worried About Machines Reading Your Emotions.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/mar/06/facial-recognition-software-emotional-science>

**WEEK 2—Jan 14 & 16—MODELS & ALGORITHMS**

Readings: O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 1 & 2

& Tanvi Misra, “When Welfare Decisions Are Left to Algorithms.” *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/02/virginia-eubanks-automating-inequality/553460/>

**WEEK 3—Jan. 21 & 23—GOOGLE 1**

Readings: Hillis, Petit, and Jarrett – “Welcome to the Googleplex,” in *Google and the Culture of Search*

**WEEK 4—Jan. 28 & 30—GOOGLE 2**

Readings: Siva Vaidhyanathan, “Google’s Ways and Means: Faith and Aptitude and Technology,” in *The Googlization of Everything*.

& Safiya Noble, “Google Has a Striking History of Bias Against Black Girls,” *TIME*. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/5209144/google-search-engine-algorithm-bias-racism/>

\* Suggested: Kirsten Grind, Sam Schechner, Robert McMillan and John West. “How Google Interferes with Its Search Algorithms and Changes Your Results.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753>

**WEEK 5—Feb. 4 & 6—GOOGLE 3**

Reading: O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 3 “Arms Race”

**WEEK 6—Feb. 11 & 13—MIDTERM EXAM**

Feb. 11: **midterm exam** (2 hours)

Feb. 13: **Guest Speaker:** Dr. Eugenia Canas on Health Information Collection

**WEEK 7 – Feb. 18 & 20—\*\*\*READING WEEK\*\*\*****WEEK 8—Feb. 25 & 27— BIG DATA & YOU: PROFITING FROM YOUR DATA**

Readings: & O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 4 – “Propaganda Machine”

& John Cheney-Lippold. “A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (6): 164-181.

& Caitlin Dewey. “98 personal data points that Facebook uses to target ads to you.” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theintersect/wp/2016/08/19/98-personal-data-points-that-facebook-uses-to-target-ads-toyou>

**WEEK 9—March 3 & 5—PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS**

Reading: O’Neil *WMD*, Ch. 5 “Civilian Casualties”

& *The Rise of Big Data Policing* (selections)

Listen: *Reply All* podcast “The Crime Machine Part 1 & 2” [OWL]

**WEEK 10—March 10 & 12—FROM BIG BROTHER TO BIG DATA: SURVEILLANCE & DATAVEILLANCE**

Reading: Readings: O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 8 & 9

Siva Vaidhyanathan, “The Surveillance Machine,” in *Antisocial Media*.

Watch: *The Circle* [OWL] \*watch outside of class

**WEEK 11—March 17 & 19— FAKE NEWS & BIG DATA POLITICS**

Reading: O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 10

& Siva Vaidhyanathan, “The Real Reason Facebook Won’t Fact-Check Political Ads.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/02/opinion/facebook-zuckerberg-political-ads.html>

Watch: *The Great Hack* [OWL] \*watch outside of class

**WEEK 12—March 24 & 26— WORK & LABOUR IN THE ERA OF BIG DATA**

Reading: & O’Neil *WMD* – Ch. 6 & 7

& Chen. A. “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>

**WEEK 13—March 31 & April 2—*DELETE YOUR ACCOUNT! OVERSIGHT & RESISTANCE***

Reading: O’Neil *WMD* – Conclusion & Afterword

Due: Written Reflection Paper on April 2<sup>nd</sup> (in class)

# NOTES FROM THE FIMS DEAN'S OFFICE

Winter 2020

## Rights and Responsibilities

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## Statement on Academic Offences

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## Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#)

## Academic Consideration for Student Absence

Students will have up to two (2) opportunities during the regular academic year to use an on-line portal to self-report an absence during the

semester, provided the following conditions are met: the absence is no more than 48 hours in duration, and the assessment for which consideration is being sought is worth 30% or less of the student's final grade. Students are expected to contact their instructors within 24 hours of the end of the period of the self-reported absence, unless noted on the syllabus. Students are not able to use the self-reporting option in the following circumstances:

- during exam periods,
- absence of a duration greater than 48 hours,
- assessments worth more than 30% of the student's final grade,
- if a student has already used the self-reporting portal twice during the academic year

If the conditions for a Self-Reported Absence are NOT met, students will need to provide a Student Medical Certificate, if the absence is medical, or provide appropriate documentation if there are compassionate grounds for the absence in question. Students are encouraged to contact the FIMS Undergraduate Student Services Office to obtain more information about the relevant documentation.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for consideration on medical grounds, or for other reasons. **All documentation required for absences that are not covered by the Self-Reported Absence Policy must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's home Faculty.**

For Western University policy on Consideration for Student Absence, see [Policy on Academic Consideration For Student Absences - Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#) and for the Student Medical Certificate (SMC), see:

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## 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. Additional information is given in the [Western Academic Calendar](#).

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**Elective courses and 4<sup>th</sup> year seminars have no recommended course averages.**

## Support Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

## SUPPORT SERVICES – LINKS

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[/ Writing Support](#)

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## Appendix A: Suggested Grade Ranges in MIT, MPI and MTP

### Guidelines to the MIT Grade Range

These guidelines are benchmarks, and are not to be followed as rigid regulations. They will be adjusted as appropriate to take into account the level of the course and any specific instructions given by a professor. As well, competency in English language usage (including spelling and grammar) may be taken into account in the assignment of grades by individual instructors. Note that the 70-79 grade range is broken into two divisions, as this is the grade range into which a large number of students fall.

#### 90-100 (Outstanding, A+)

The report shows sparkling originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic. Sophisticated synthesis and analysis of the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of the topic are demonstrated. Mastery of complex material and ideas is immediately evident. The topic is treated with sensitivity and subtlety of thought. The quality of the writing and background research is exemplary.

#### 80-89 (Excellent, A)

The report shows originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic; it gets to the heart of the matter with comments and/or questions. It is clearly focused and logically organized. The quality of writing makes the report immediately understandable. Mastery of complex material and ideas is demonstrated. The report is of appropriate length, while preserving the priorities and emphasis of the material, so that the result is meaningful, not simplistic.

#### 75-79 (Very Good, B+)

The report shows above average analysis, critical thinking and independent thought. Claims are supported by ample evidence and the components of the topic are well-researched and presented. The topic is addressed in reasonable depth and/or breadth and covers material appropriate to the course. The analysis is organized around focal points and the argument is easily followed. The report demonstrates an above average ability to write in an intelligible style and to condense material meaningfully and with a concern for priorities of that material.

#### 70-74 (Good, B)

The report shows an attempt at analysis and critical thinking. Claims are supported by reasonable evidence. The topic is addressed in some depth and/or breadth, with references to the appropriate literature and course material. The analysis is organized around focal points. The report is generally well written and well argued.

#### 60-69 (Competent, C)

The report demonstrates adequate comprehension of the topic. The report is on topic and is a reasonable summary of material covered in the course, but goes no further. Facts are stated accurately; the quality of writing is sufficiently intelligible with enough elaboration and enough connections made between ideas to permit a reader to understand the point of the report.

#### 50-59 (Marginal, D)

The report shows less than adequate comprehension of the topic and of the material covered by the course. The report is a less than adequate summary of sources and/or is considerably off-topic. Facts are stated inaccurately or ambiguously; the writing style is difficult to follow; there is insufficient elaboration to permit reader's comprehension of relations among ideas; little judgment is shown in selecting detail for inclusion in the report.

#### Below 50 (Unacceptable, F)

The report demonstrates a failure to comprehend the topic. The material is disorganized and unintelligible. The report clearly does not meet the minimal requirements of the assignment.

## Appendix B: Guidelines of Academic Appeals for FIMS Students

### Grounds for Appeal:

The Faculty of Information and Media Studies does not view the appeals process as an opportunity for students to solicit a second opinion on a grade assigned to a particular piece of work. Appeals must pertain to the final grade in a course, and will only be entertained if sufficient grounds for appeal can be met, including: medical or compassionate circumstances, a defect in the evaluation process, bias, inaccuracy or unfairness.

### Stages in the Appeals Process:

**The first stage of the process is a discussion of the disputed grade with the appropriate Teaching Assistant (if applicable), and subsequently, the course Instructor.** For grades assigned to individual assignments, essays, lab reports, projects and tests completed throughout the term, the student first must appeal to the Teaching Assistant or Instructor of the course, within three weeks of the date on which the Instructor or Teaching Assistant returned the assignments to the class. The Appeals Committee will not hear any further appeals about the final grade in any course unless this first step has been taken.

**If completion of the first stage has not resolved the matter, the student may appeal the final grade in the course to the FIMS Appeals Committee.** Appeals of final grades must be **within the time frame indicated in the Undergraduate Calendar.** It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the appeal is submitted within the deadline. The student shall submit a formal letter to the FIMS Appeals Committee outlining the grounds for the appeal, the remedy sought and relevant materials including the information about when and with whom (Teaching Assistant and/or Instructor) the student met, as described in Stage 1. If the appeal involves a request for work to be regraded, the original marked work and a clean copy (if possible) must be included. If the appeal is commenced once the deadline has passed, it will not be considered either by the Appeals Committee or by the Associate Dean.

### **The FIMS Appeals Committee has the discretion to determine whether the grounds for appeal have been met.**

If the Committee deems that the reasons for the appeal are not legitimate, the Associate Dean will be informed. The appeal will be terminated and the student will be informed.

### **If the Committee decides that the grounds for appeal have been met, the following steps will be taken:**

1. the course Instructor will be shown the appeal letter and offered an opportunity to make a written response;
2. if work is to be regraded, a reader will be appointed who is competent in the area in question and was not involved in the assignment of the original mark. The reader will consider the work in question and will arrive at an independent evaluation. If there is a large discrepancy between the original mark and the regraded mark, a second reader may be appointed by the Committee. **If the appointed reader(s) arrive at a grade within five marks of the original, the original grade will stand.**

### **The FIMS Appeals Committee will review the evidence and will make a recommendation on the case to the Associate Dean Undergraduate.**

The Associate Dean Undergraduate will consider the recommendation from the Appeals Committee, and will make a decision. The student and the instructor will be notified promptly and in writing by the Associate Dean of the decision and of the change in grade, if any. Within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, the Associate Dean's decision on the matter is final.

Further appeals are possible under certain circumstances to the Senate Review Board Academic (for Undergraduate students) or to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (for Graduate students) but the student should carefully consult the guidelines regarding such Appeals.



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The Faculty of Information and Media Studies does not view the appeals process as an opportunity for students to solicit a second opinion on a grade assigned to a particular piece of work. Appeals must pertain to the final grade in a course, and will only be entertained if sufficient grounds for appeal can be met, including: medical or compassionate circumstances, a defect in the evaluation process, bias, inaccuracy or unfairness.

### Stages in the Appeals Process:

**The first stage of the process is a discussion of the disputed grade with the appropriate Teaching Assistant (if applicable), and subsequently, the course Instructor.** For grades assigned to individual assignments, essays, lab reports, projects and tests completed throughout the term, the student first must appeal to the Teaching Assistant or Instructor of the course, within three weeks of the date on which the Instructor or Teaching Assistant returned the assignments to the class. The Appeals Committee will not hear any further appeals about the final grade in any course unless this first step has been taken.

**If completion of the first stage has not resolved the matter, the student may appeal the final grade in the course to the FIMS Appeals Committee.** Appeals of final grades must be **within the time frame indicated in the Undergraduate Calendar.** It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the appeal is submitted within the deadline. The student shall submit a formal letter to the FIMS Appeals Committee outlining the grounds for the appeal, the remedy sought and relevant materials including the information about when and with whom (Teaching Assistant and/or Instructor) the student met, as described in Stage 1. If the appeal involves a request for work to be regraded, the original marked work and a clean copy (if possible) must be included. If the appeal is commenced once the deadline has passed, it will not be considered either by the Appeals Committee or by the Associate Dean.

### **The FIMS Appeals Committee has the discretion to determine whether the grounds for appeal have been met.**

If the Committee deems that the reasons for the appeal are not legitimate, the Associate Dean will be informed. The appeal will be terminated and the student will be informed.

### **If the Committee decides that the grounds for appeal have been met, the following steps will be taken:**

1. the course Instructor will be shown the appeal letter and offered an opportunity to make a written response;
2. if work is to be regraded, a reader will be appointed who is competent in the area in question and was not involved in the assignment of the original mark. The reader will consider the work in question and will arrive at an independent evaluation. If there is a large discrepancy between the original mark and the regraded mark, a second reader may be appointed by the Committee. **If the appointed reader(s) arrive at a grade within five marks of the original, the original grade will stand.**

### **The FIMS Appeals Committee will review the evidence and will make a recommendation on the case to the Associate Dean Undergraduate.**

The Associate Dean Undergraduate will consider the recommendation from the Appeals Committee, and will make a decision. The student and the instructor will be notified promptly and in writing by the Associate Dean of the decision and of the change in grade, if any. Within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, the Associate Dean's decision on the matter is final.

Further appeals are possible under certain circumstances to the Senate Review Board Academic (for Undergraduate students) or to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (for Graduate students) but the student should carefully consult the guidelines regarding such Appeals.