Data, Politics, and Power: Critical and Ethical Perspectives on Big Data and Algorithms (INSC 598 A)

Instructor: Dr. Anna Lauren Hoffmann  
Email: alho@uw.edu  
Office: MGH 330H  
Office hours: W, 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM

Class meeting times: MW, 3:30 PM - 5:20 PM  
Class location: EEB 042

Course Description

This graduate seminar will ground students in critical social and theoretical concepts for evaluating—and normatively assessing—the data scientific practices and algorithmic processes that pervade our lives. The seminar’s frame is three-fold: biopolitics, power, and forms of administrative violence; historical perspectives on the rise and role of data-based and statistical knowledge in shaping lives and life chances; current perspectives on the role of big data and algorithms in the normative construction of bodies and identities.

Student Outcomes/Learning Goals

Upon completion of the course, students will:

- Possess a working knowledge of the selected theoretical and historical perspectives presented in the course.
- Be able to connect emerging issues in big data to longer-standing theories, debates, and frameworks.
- Improve in their ability to critically engage (connect and critique) selected scholarly debates around data, power, and society today.

Required Course Materials


All other readings will be made available on Canvas.
Assignments

During the quarter, students will be evaluated on the following:

- **Attendance & Participation (20%)**: Students should attend all classes and actively participate in in class discussions and exercises. (More detail on attendance policy below.)
- **In-Class Reflection Writing (10%)**: Each week, a small amount of class time will be set aside for written reflection. (These reflections will be shared with the instructor and evaluated on a “did do/did not do” basis.)
- **Discussion Opener (20%)**: Starting with Week 4, students will introduce and open discussion on one selected reading during the quarter. This should include a short written summary and outline to be shared with the class.
- **Abstract & Annotated Bibliography (20%)**: Midway through the quarter, students will submit a paper abstract as well as a short, annotated bibliography. This assignment will serve as a proposal for the final paper.
- **Final paper (30%)**: At the end of the term, students will submit a final scholarly paper relevant to both the course topic and the student’s own individual research/theoretical interests. The paper need not be itself publishable, but it should strive to be eventually publishable or presentable (as a journal article, conference paper, theory section of a dissertation or book, etc...).

*Alternatives to the abstract and final paper assignments may be negotiated with the instructor, so long as the alternative: 1) is of equivalent rigor and effort and 2) clearly dovetails with the student’s personal and professional goals.

More detailed information for each assignment will be available on Canvas.

Course Schedule

**Week 1: Big Data - Questions & Dilemmas**

**THURSDAY (09/21)**

Week 2: Foucault, Discipline, & Biopower

TUESDAY (10/03)

Optional:

THURSDAY (10/05)

Week 3: Grappling with Foucault

TUESDAY (10/10)

THURSDAY (10/12)
Week 4: Power, Numbers, & Norms

TUESDAY (10/17)

THURSDAY (10/19)
Optional:

Week 5: Bodies, Censuses, & Papers

TUESDAY (10/24)
- Torpey, J. (2000). The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State. Cambridge University Press. (Ch. 4)

THURSDAY (10/26)
- Writing break; no class.

Week 6: Data, Digitization, & Corporate Power

TUESDAY (10/31)
- Gandy, O.H. (1993). The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information. Boulder, CO: Westview. (Ch. 1-3 [you can just skim Ch. 2])
THURSDAY (11/02)

*Week 7: Power in the Algorithm*

TUESDAY (11/07)

Optional:

THURSDAY (11/09)

*Week 8: Data, Security, & Freedom*

TUESDAY (11/14)

Optional:
THURSDAY (11/16)

Optional

Week 9: Postscript

TUESDAY (11/21)

THURSDAY (11/23)
- Thanksgiving Break; no class.

Week 10: Working Week

TUESDAY (11/28)
- Individual meetings w/ Dr. Hoffmann

THURSDAY (11/30)
- Writing day; no class.

Week 11: Workshopping Week

TUESDAY (12/05)
- Peer Paper Workshops

THURSDAY (12/07)
- Peer Paper Workshops

Week 12: Finals Week
- No final exam. Final papers due Tuesday, 12/12/17 at 12 PM.
Grading

Work will be evaluated according to a 4.0 grading scale, as set forth by the University. The scale is as follows:

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<td>C</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>3.8-3.5</td>
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<td>B-</td>
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(Final grades will be rounded to the nearest tenth of a point above. For example, both 3.41 and 3.47 would be rounded up 3.5.)

Attendance Policy

Students will be granted one unexcused absence during the quarter without penalty. Other absences—for example, university-sanctioned religious observances, military service, or other reasons approved in advance by the instructor—will not incur penalty. If these excused absences significantly impact a student’s ability to participate in discussion, alternative arrangements or work may be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Late Assignments

Late work will not be accepted, unless either 1) a late submission has been approved in advance by the instructor or 2) it is the result of extenuating circumstances or for a university-sanctioned reason. Please refer to the iSchool's complete Academic Policies & Conduct.

Diversity and Inclusivity

At the University of Washington, diversity is integral to excellence. We value and honor diverse experiences and perspectives, strive to create welcoming and respectful learning environments, and promote access, opportunity and justice for all.

Access and Accommodations

It is the policy and practice of the University of Washington—as well as your instructor—to create inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law. If you have already established accommodations with Disability Resources for Students (DRS), please communicate your approved accommodations to me at your earliest convenience so we can discuss your needs in this course.
If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations (conditions include but not limited to; mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924 or uwdrs@uw.edu or disability.uw.edu. DRS offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or temporary health conditions.

**Academic Conduct**

The Information School encourages an environment of academic integrity and mutual respect that is tolerant, inclusive and supportive of the educational goals of all its members.

In this course, mutual respect includes respect for standards of academic integrity. This includes a commitment to avoid willfully or maliciously violating instructor directions to students or cheating on class assignments or exams, deliberately engaging in plagiarism, or—in more severe offenses—stealing or altering academic materials.

All incidents of alleged academic misconduct are reported to the associate dean for academics who will investigate the situation. Academic misconduct reviews will adhere to the policies outlined in the Student Conduct Code and managed by the Office of Community Standards and Student Conduct.

**Additional Resources**

**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)** – This FAQ was created by the University of Washington to help students impacted by the recent rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in the United States. Though the FAQ does not constitute legal advice, it can direct you to useful resources. In addition, the City of Seattle maintains a list of relevant workshops, legal resources, and other information for Seattle residents [here](#).

**iSchool Technology Requirements** - The iSchool has a set of technology requirements for both online and residential students. We highly recommend that students adhere to these standards which are updated annually and located [here](#). Students who do not meet these standards may experience technology problems throughout the course.

**iSchool Technology Training** - Knowledge base for Canvas, VoiceThread, web conferencing systems, and other online learning tools.

**UW Libraries** - In this course you may be required to access a large number of databases through the Internet. Several of these databases are publicly available, but some are proprietary and access requires authentication through the [UW Libraries](#). Information about logging in to use these databases is available on the [Connecting to the Libraries](#) page.
**iSchool Academic Policies** - If you have additional questions regarding the above, you may wish to review the iSchool’s Academic Policies. These policies cover:

- Students with Disabilities
- TA Concerns
- Grading Criteria
- Academic Conduct
  - Academic Integrity
  - Copyright
  - Privacy
  - Student Code of Conduct
  - Evaluation of Student Work