We are often told that we are living in an “Information Society,” and indeed, this is a truth that seems self-evident: communications and information technologies increasingly pervade our homes, our workplaces, our schools, even our own bodies. But what exactly do we mean when we talk about the “Information Society”? If we are living in an Information Society, when did it come into being? What developments — social, economic, political, or technological — made it possible? How does it differ from earlier eras? And finally, and most significantly: what does it all mean?

This course will explore the ways in Western, industrialized societies, over the course of the previous two centuries, came to see information as a crucial commercial, scientific, organizational, political, and commercial asset. Although at the center of our story will be the development of new information technologies — from printing press to telephone to computer to Internet — our focus will not be on machines, but on people, and on the ways in which average individuals contributed to, made sense of, and come to terms with, the many social, technological, and political developments that have shaped the contours of our modern Information Society. Our goal is to use these historical perspectives to inform our discussions about issues of contemporary concern about information technology.

Nathan Ensmenger
School of Informatics & Computing

I222 • Fall 2013
I222: The Information Society

Professor Nathan Ensmenger
303 Informatics West
Office Hours: M 9-11 am, T 1:30-2:30 pm
nensmeng@indiana.edu

Course Format:
The Information Society course meets on twice weekly. To the degree possible with such a
large course, our meetings will be a mixed lecture-discussion format. Our first session each
week will typically introduce our week’s topic; the second provides further development, as
well as an opportunity to talk about the readings and answer any questions that you might
have.

Attendance in the course is more than usually mandatory. Since there is no textbook for the
course, it is absolutely essential that you attend the lectures. I make extensive use of images,
audio, and video. Although I will make some of this material available on the OnCourse site,
much of it will be available only during class. If you do need to miss class please let me or
one of the AIs know in advance.

The readings in the course draw on the very best literature from history, sociology, anthro-
pology, and the emerging field of Internet studies. Your need to prepare each week’s readings
*in advance* of the first lecture.

Expectations/Grading:
As citizens of the Information Society you are all constantly bombarded with claims about
the ways in which information technology is changing your lives, your careers, and the world
you live in — whether you like it or not. The goal of the course is to provide you with the
tools for critically evaluating these claims. Our primary methodology will be historical. This
might at first seem unusual, since so much of the rhetoric of the Information Society asserts
that there is no relevant history, and that we are living in an era in which the old rules and
modes of thinking no longer apply. But we are not the first society to believe itself to be
living through an unprecedented technological revolution, and so in this course, we will
learn to apply the time-honored perspectives of the humanistic disciplines to the study of
contemporary technological developments.

Students will learn to think historically, to broaden their perspective on the relationship be-
tween technology and society to include insights from the humanities and social sciences,
and to master the very best available relevant scholarly literature.

Grading in this class will be based on four major components: two short response papers
(20%), a longer primary-source research paper (20%), an in-class mid-term (30%), and a final
exam (30%).
Course Schedule

I Introduction

January 14: Information, Data, Knowledge
January 16: Gutenberg, Galileo, Google


II The Age of Information

January 21: Books, Coffee, Revolution
January 23: The Politics of the Post-Office


III Industrializing Information

January 28: Information Factories
January 30: When Computers Were Human


IV When Information is Power

February 4: From Mad Men to Big Brother


V War: what is it good for?

February 11: Giant Brains; or, Machines that Think
February 13: Build your own Computer!


VI The Computerization of Society

February 18: IBM and the Seven Dwarves
February 20: Software Revolution

VII  Information Regurgitation

February 25: Mid Semester Wrap-Up
February 27: Mid-Term Exam

In-class mid-term: covers weeks 1–7.

VIII  Silicon Valley 1.0

March 4: Silicon Valley 1.0
March 6: Simulations, Simulacra, and the Matrix


IX  From Hippies to Hackers

March 11: From Videotext to Videogames
March 13: Triumph of the Nerds

Buckingham, David. “Studying computer games” in Diane Carr et al., Computer games: Text, narrative and play (Polity, 2006)

X  Spring Break

March 18, March 20

Party on.

XI  Great Myths in the History of Computing

March 25: No one expects the Computer Revolution …
March 27: Apple, IBM, Microsoft

Cringely, Robert X. Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can't Get a Date Addison-Wesley, 1992. Selected chapters.

XII  Origins of the Internet

April 1: ARPAnet to Internet
April 3: The Architecture of the Internet

Abbate, Janet. Inventing the Internet (MIT Press 1999), Chapters 1-2.
XIII Cyberspace(s)

April 8: Living the Virtual Life
April 10: Code is Law


Artifact Assignment: Primary source analysis of the early history of the PC.

XIV Convergence

April 15: The Social Construction of the Cell Phone
April 17: Virtual Materiality


XV Post-Modern, Post-Industrial, Post-Information?

April 22: Information Overload
April 24: Digital Globalism?

Various short online articles: “How Sticky Is Membership on Facebook? Just Try Breaking Free”; “Facebook can ruin your life ...”; “Oh Crap. My Parents Joined Facebook”; “Psychologist finds Wikipedians grumpy and closed-minded”; “Angry online divorcee ‘kills’ virtual ex-hubby”; “SEXTORTION AT EISENHOWER HIGH”; “Judges fear dangers of online ‘rat’ database”; “Teen Tests Internet’s Lewd Track Record”; “E-Mail Surveillance Renews Concerns in Congress”; “Stop the Internet, I want to get off”; “How Google Earth Ate Our Town”; “China’s All-Seeing Eye”; “U.S. corporations massively read employee e-mail”; “The Invasion of Privacy Through Your Mobile Phone”

XVI Red Pill, Blue Pill …

April 29: The Information Revolution Revisited
May 1: Big Finish

No readings.

Final Exam Information:

Further information will be provided as the Registrar’s office makes it available.