



Department of Media, Culture, and Communication

MCC-UE 1200 003 Inquiry Seminar: Secrecy

Fall 2024

Instructor and Course Information

- Prof. Lisa Gitelman (she/her)
- W 9:30-12:00 East 207

Office hours available via Zoom and in-person (in East 720) by appointment, or grab me after class; email answered promptly during business hours EST lg91@nyu.edu

Course Description

That we are now all subjects of “surveillance capitalism” verges on the unremarkable, while privacy is both hotly contested in some quarters and a mere prompt for the selection of “preferences” in others. The goal of this course is to make new sense of such present concerns by looking into the histories not so much of privacy but of secrecy. What is the difference and what the connections between privacy and secrecy? How should we think of secrecy in relation to amnesia, erasure, and other forms of unknowing or anti-epistemology and non-communication. Discussion of readings in common will address media and public secrecy (knowing what not to know), samizdat, classification, brainwashing, and more. All students will be asked to write two short essays and then to plan a larger research project related to the themes of the course.

In general, MCC’s Inquiry Seminars are designed to establish close faculty contact with students early in their trajectories in order to help them build a curious, critical mindset that they can take with them to the rest of their coursework as well as to internships and other activities.

The function of the university is not simply to teach bread-winning . . . to be a center of polite society; it is to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life . . . which forms the secret of civilization.

---WEB Du Bois

Learning Outcomes

- Deepen your knowledge of secrecy and other forms of anti-epistemology and non-communication as they relate to media in culturally and historically specific ways.

- Develop a more critical, self-conscious understanding of the epistemic, economic, ethical, and cultural dynamics inherent to creating, maintaining, and exposing secrets.
- Understand the specific challenges presented by comparative, multi-sited analyses of media, culture, and communication. How is secrecy itself different in different times and different contexts?
- Demonstrate your knowledge by designing your own research project in a way that builds specifically on your training and interests in media studies.

Readings/Texts

All readings will be available via links in the syllabus below or via Brightspace. Be sure that you are logged in to NYU home as well as to the NYU libraries. If a link seems broken or you can't find the specified reading, please let me know and I will try to troubleshoot. You are responsible for all readings-in-common. Come to class prepared to discuss them: "skimming" will not be enough, and note-taking as you read is strongly encouraged. Plan ahead, and try to avoid staring into your laptop during class. A seminar requires your attention, and students who stay involved in the conversation generally do better in this course. Asking good questions is a plus. Cultivate a curious, critical mindset.

Graded Assignments

Close reading essay (~750-1000 words): During the first few weeks of class, we will work together on a few close readings of texts, where "texts" refers broadly to objects of analysis that are of interest in Media, Culture, and Communication. In Week 4 you'll be asked to write a short close reading of your own. Pick a text—a place, a film, an image, an event, a story, an artwork, etc.—and unpack its meaning(s). What are the issues it raises and how has its creator raised them? What relevant contexts are there, apart from the creator's intentions, that contribute to the meaning(s) in question? Organize your thoughts into a persuasive interpretative essay. Due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 5 PM on Saturday, September 28th.

Short critical essay (~750-1000 words): Though relatively brief, many of our course readings will be challenging. They will require study. Pick one week's reading and write a short essay aimed at identifying the author's inquiry before we meet as a class: How is a question posed, and how is it answered? What is the argument, and how is it made? How does the author use evidence to support his/her/their argument? Are you convinced? Due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 5 PM on Tuesday in either Week 5, 6, 7, or 8. You decide.

Note: I will grade and comment a.s.a.p. You may rewrite your short critical essay for a better grade. Re-written essays are due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 5 PM on Thursday the week after they are received (no exceptions). This means you can revise having considered (a) my comments, (b) class discussion of the reading in question, and (c) any recap of that discussion in the next week's class.

Final project design: (~1250-1500 words plus bibliography) For this course you won't have to write a long research paper, you'll have to plan one. The challenge of this assignment is to come up with a good research question, elaborate its stakes (who should care and why), identify some relevant resources, and—the hardest part—develop a tentative thesis. I will distribute a CFP (“Call for Papers”) in Week 9, so that's when you'll have to begin to articulate your topic and then your question. Due 12/4 in class.

Take-home final: Essay format, 2-hour timed, open notebook, administered during finals week. This exam will test your familiarity and engagement with course readings. It is meant as a final reflective synthesis, a prompt for recalling just how much you have learned during the semester and how the different readings intersect with one another as well as differ in their methods and substance.

EVALUATION

- Engagement (timely and evident preparation for class, consistent participatory effort, collaborative ethos)10%
- Short critical essay.....20%
- Close reading essay20%
- Final Project Design.....30%
- Take home final20%

A = Excellent. This work is comprehensive and detailed, integrating themes and concepts from discussions, lectures and readings. Writing is clear, analytical and organized. Arguments offer specific examples and concisely evaluate evidence. Students who earn this grade are prepared for class, synthesize course materials and contribute insightfully.

B = Good. This work is complete and accurate, offering insights at general level of understanding. Writing is clear, uses examples properly and tends toward broad analysis. Classroom participation is consistent and thoughtful.

C = Average. This work is correct but is largely descriptive, lacking analysis. Writing is vague and at times tangential. Arguments are unorganized, without specific examples or analysis. Classroom participation is inarticulate.

D = Unsatisfactory. This work is incomplete, and evidences little understanding of the readings or discussions. Arguments demonstrate inattention to detail, misunderstand course material and overlook significant themes. Classroom participation is spotty, unprepared and off topic.

F = Failed. This grade indicates a failure to participate and/or incomplete assignments.

A = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B = 84-86

B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79
C = 74-76
C- = 70-73

D+ = 65-69
D = 60-64
F = < 6

Course Policies

Attendance is key. Please plan to attend every class session. If you need to miss more than two of our thirteen scheduled sessions, please be in touch immediately to schedule a make-up session (one-on-one or small-group, as needed) on that week's material via Zoom, preferably on Friday. (If you joined the class late due to late registration, more than one absence requires a make-up session.) Make-up sessions will be in the form of British-style tutorials: I will ask you to give an informal presentation about the assigned readings for the week, and I will engage you in discussion about their implications, let you know what we discussed in class. Chronic lateness or absenteeism will have a depressing effect on your grade.

Please expect to have at least two one-on-one consultations with me during the semester. One of these one-on-one meetings will be a required meeting in lieu of a class session in the week of Thanksgiving.

Email is the best way to reach me, and you should always feel free. If I have announcements, you will hear from me via email using NYU Brightspace. This syllabus is our master document and portal to many readings, but I will also be building out weekly units in NYU Brightspace as the semester progresses to offer some more guidance/structure/support. Questions? Ask questions! Suggestions? Always welcome. Related materials? Yes! Please bring them to our attention in class.

An Important Note about Etiquette

Since a seminar depends upon collective inquiry (which depends upon mutual respect), please arrive on time and try to avoid walking in and out of the room during discussion. Don't worry, we will take a short comfort/snack break at some point during each class session. (Of course, feel free to let me know if you think a break is overdue.) By the same token, please do not buffer or avoid the seminar experience by hiding behind your laptop or your phone. Phones should be silenced and put away, and laptops remain closed unless referring to a specific passage in the readings or pursuing an agreed-upon class activity. For reasons I will elaborate, I encourage you to use an old-fashioned notebook, not (just) a keyboard, when you take notes on readings and discussions.

Commitment to Anti-Racism, Inclusion, and Equity

NYU values an inclusive and equitable environment for all students. I hope to foster a sense of community in this class and consider it a place where individuals of all backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, national origins, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious and political affiliations, and abilities will be treated with respect. It is my intent that all students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. If this standard is not being upheld, please feel free to speak with me.

MCC's Land Acknowledgement

We begin by acknowledging that we are gathered, speaking, and learning on Lenapehoking, the ancestral lands of the Lenape peoples, which settlers call New York City. We do this with humility and gratitude, while recognizing the violence of forced relocation and displacement of the Lenape Peoples with whom this department and university are in an ongoing process of learning. These peoples are known today as the Delaware Nation, in Anadarko Oklahoma; the Delaware Tribe of Indians, in Bartlesville Oklahoma; the Stockbridge-Munsee Community, in Bowler Wisconsin; and the Munsee Delaware Nation, and the Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit, or Delaware Nation at Moraviantown, both in Ontario, Canada.

We acknowledge the need for the recognition of the history of Lenapehoking – a land stolen from, never traded by, the Lenape peoples, who continue to live in New York City and beyond. We acknowledge the systemic and ongoing violence of settler colonialism, and the genocidal violence that resulted in both forced relocation and in physical and psychological trauma perpetrated across generations. We acknowledge in particular that settlers have broken, and continue to break, their treaties with Lenape peoples, beginning with the actions of Henry Hudson and Peter Minuit in first appropriating this land.

We recognize that reparative action requires long-term maintenance and multigenerational efforts to build relationships with the sovereign nations of the Lenape peoples. We commit to upholding an ongoing and living set of commitments with these nations by working directly with Tribal Governments and Authorized Tribal Representatives to ensure our words and actions are in step with our goals.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism

The relationship between students and faculty is the keystone of the educational experience at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. This relationship takes an honor code for granted and mutual trust, respect, and responsibility as foundational requirements. Thus, how you learn is as important as what you learn. A university education aims not only to produce high-quality scholars, but to also cultivate honorable citizens.

Academic integrity is the guiding principle for all that you do, from taking exams to making oral presentations to writing term papers. It requires that you recognize and acknowledge information derived from others and take credit only for ideas and work that are yours.

You violate the principle of academic integrity when you cheat on an exam, submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors, receive help on a take-home examination that calls for independent work, or plagiarize. Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated. Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score, and/or other materials that are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following: copy verbatim from a book, an article, or other media; download documents from the Internet; purchase documents; report from other's oral work; paraphrase or restate someone

else's facts, analysis, and/or conclusions; or copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.

Your professors are responsible for helping you to understand other people's ideas, to use resources and conscientiously acknowledge them, and to develop and clarify your own thinking. You should know what constitutes good and honest scholarship, style guide preferences, and formats for assignments for each of your courses. Consult your professors for help with problems related to fulfilling course assignments, including questions related to attribution of sources. Through reading, writing, and discussion, you will undoubtedly acquire ideas from others, and exchange ideas and opinions with others, including your classmates and professors. You will be expected, and often required, to build your own work on that of other people. In so doing, you are expected to credit those sources that have contributed to the development of your ideas.

Avoiding Academic Dishonesty

- Organize your time appropriately to avoid undue pressure, and acquire good study habits, including note taking.
- Learn proper forms of citation. Always check with your professors of record for their preferred style guides. Directly copied material must always be in quotes; paraphrased material must be acknowledged; even ideas and organization derived from your own previous work or another's work need to be acknowledged.
- Always proofread your finished work to be sure that quotation marks, footnotes and other references were not inadvertently omitted. Know the source of each citation.
- Do not submit the same work for more than one class without first obtaining the permission of both professors even if you believe that work you have already completed satisfies the requirements of another assignment.
- Save your notes and drafts of your papers as evidence of your original work.

Disciplinary Sanctions

When a professor suspects cheating, plagiarism, and/or other forms of academic dishonesty, appropriate disciplinary action may be taken following the department procedure or through referral to the Committee on Student Discipline. The Steinhardt School Statement on Academic Integrity is consistent with the New York University Policy on Student Conduct, published in the NYU Student Guide.

Student Resources

- **Student Accessibility**
New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for all students, and academic accommodations are available for qualified students who disclose their disability to the Moses Center. Students requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center for Student Accessibility as early as possible in the semester for assistance (telephone: 212-998-4980 / website: www.nyu.edu/csa / email: mosescsa@nyu.edu).
- **NYU Writing Center** (Washington Square): 411 Lafayette, 4th Floor. Schedule an appointment online at <https://nyu.mywconline.com> or just walk-in.
- **Mental Health & Wellness**

If you are experiencing undue personal and/or academic stress during the semester that may be interfering with your ability to perform academically, The NYU Wellness Exchange (212 443 9999) offers a range of services to assist and support you. I am available to speak with you about stresses related to your work in my course, and I can assist you in connecting with The Wellness Exchange. The [Wellness Exchange](#) offers drop-in services on campus on a regular basis. Additionally, if you anticipate any challenges with completing the assignments, readings, exams and other work required in this course, I encourage you to register with [the Moses Center](#) in advance so that you may be granted the proper academic accommodations.

- **Religious Accommodations**

NYU's Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. You must notify me in advance of religious holidays or observances that might coincide with exams, assignments, or class times to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives. Students may also contact religiousaccommodations@nyu.edu for assistance.

- **Your trusty MCC advisor** is also just a quick email away at comm.advisors@nyu.edu.

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Schedule of Classes, Readings, Activities, and Assignments

(Subject to change; any major changes will be announced via NYU Brightspace)

Fourteen Wednesdays and More

1

September 4 Introductions

We'll get ourselves sorted, and we'll discuss [Tim Wu's 2020 review of Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*](#) as an initial attempt to cultivate a shared understanding of privacy in relation to secrecy.

2

September 11

Secrecy: A Matter of Storage?

We'll discuss Shannon Mattern's essay, "[Encrypted Repositories: Techniques of Secret Storage, From Desks to Databases](#)" (2020), and we'll think about secret spaces/places before tackling some examples of close reading.

3

September 18

Secrecy at Work

Jana Costas and Christopher Grey, [Secrets at Work: The Hidden Architecture of Organizational Life](#) (2016). Intro pp. 1-12 and Chapter 5. This book starts with a lucid discussion of how privacy and secrecy relate to one another. Think about how organizations like NYU or like any of your employment or internship sites might have “hidden architectures.”

4

September 25

Secrecy as/and Restricted Speech

Eric Michaels, [Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons](#) (1994). Please browse around a little in this book and read Chapter One, “A Primer.”

Close reading assignment due by 5 PM Saturday, September 28. Please email it to gitelman@nyu.edu .

5

October 2

“Public” Secrecy?

We’ll discuss the [Introduction](#) to Margaret Hillenbrand’s *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (2020), along with Kate Nicholson, [“Demonstrators in Russia Resort to Blank Sign Protests”](#) (2022). Are there other news items or examples that you can bring to the table to help with the concept of public secrecy?

6

October 9

“Spectacular” Secrecy?

We’ll discuss Jacqueline Goldsby’s [A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature](#) (2006) pp. 12-27, and we’ll take a look at coverage of the [National Museum for Peace and Justice](#), which opened in Alabama in 2018.

7

October 16

The Unmarked Unknown

We’ll discuss Michael Mandiberg’s [“Wikipedia’s Race and Ethnicity Gap and the Unverifiability of Whiteness”](#) (2023). When you write an essay it is essential (i.e., required, ethical) that you include a citation if you use someone else’s words or ideas. On Wikipedia, the rules for citation even are more extreme, since optimally *facts* come from reliable sources that have been identified.

8

October 23

Brainwashing

We’ll discuss Timothy Melley, [“Brain Warfare: The Covert Sphere, Terrorism, and the Legacy of the Cold War”](#) (2011). If you’d also like to read a simpler history of

brainwashing in the US—one that agrees with Melley—see Lorraine Boissoneault’s [“The True Story”](#) (2017)

9

October 30

Wiretapping

We’ll discuss Brian Hochman’s *The Listeners: A History of Wiretapping in the United States* (2022), [Introduction](#) and [Epilogue](#),

I’ll also distribute a Call for Papers during class, so this period will include an introductory discussion about the Final Project Design assignment that is due on the last day of class. Be thinking of secrecy-related topics that you’d like to pursue.

10

November 6

Meta-Secrecy?

We’ll discuss Susan A. Crane, *Nothing Happened Here: A History* (2021), Episode 1, [“Studying How Nothing Happens,”](#) pp. 21-66.

11

November 13

Samizdat, Secret Writing, Underground Communication

We’ll discuss Serguei Alex. Oushakine’s [“The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat”](#) (2001). How does Oushakine’s discussion of Soviet-era dissidents resonate with more contemporary concerns?

12

November 20

A Return Look at Surveillance

We’ll discuss Philip E. Agre’s classic account, [“Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy.”](#) *Information Society* 10:2 (1994) 101-127. (You may skip pp. 118-122.)

13

November 27 (day before Thanksgiving)

We will schedule one-on-one meetings instead of class this week to discuss your in-progress Final Project Designs.

14

December 4

Final Project Designs due in class (hard copies please). We will spend the class period reviewing for the final exam.

Exam week

Take-home, open-notebook exam administered at a time/day we arrange together.