

Department of Media, Culture, and Communication MCC-UE 1200 011 Inquiry Seminar: Total Knowledge Spring 2024

Instructor and Course Information

- Prof. Lisa Gitelman
- W 11:00-1:30 Silver 518

Office hours available in-person (East 720) after class and always by appointment; email answered promptly during business hours EST lg91@nyu.edu . I use she/her pronouns; please address me as “Lisa” or “Professor Gitelman,” whichever you are most comfortable with.

Course Description

Contemporary media offer us multiple versions of (supposedly) total knowledge: Wikipedia, Google, Baidu, and now Large Language Models like GPT4. How should we understand the project of total knowledge? What are its presumptions, precursors, promises, and pitfalls? What pathways lead from encyclopedism to so-called artificial intelligence? Readings in common will address histories and theories related to the project of total knowledge.

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 understanding of cultural, political, and media histories as they relate to totalizing knowledge projects from encyclopedism to artificial intelligence.
- Develop a more critical, self-conscious understanding of the epistemic, economic, ethical, and cultural dynamics inherent to (supposedly) total knowledge in its various forms.
- Understand the specific challenges presented by comparative, multi-sited analyses of media, culture, and communication. How are ways of knowing different in different times and different contexts?

- Demonstrate your own perspective 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. 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 and there may be a few additions toward the end of the semester. Come to class prepared to discuss readings: "skimming" will never be enough; note-taking as you read is strongly encouraged. Please cultivate a curious, critical mindset.

A 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 a notebook, not (just) a keyboard, when you take notes on readings and discussions.

Graded Assignments

Close reading essay (~750-1000 words): During the first few weeks of class, we will work together on 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 about an institutional setting (a building) in New York City. Pick a building—a library, a department store, a museum, etc.—and reflect on the way it works (and/or doesn't) as a classification system or as an organization of some presumptive whole. How does its layout, design, contents, and/or self-presentation aim to sum up something about the world we inhabit? (For example, department stores are usually divided into men's, women's, boy's, and girl's departments, . . .; the new Wegmans is divided into . . .?). Comparing two such institutions might be edifying. Try to organize your thoughts into a persuasive interpretative essay. Due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 4 PM on Saturday, February 17th.

Short critical essay (~750-1000 words): Though relatively brief, many of our course readings will be challenging. They will require study. Pick one 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? Is there an argument, what is it, and how is it made? Consider the author's examples, their evidence, their field of

reference. 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. I will grade and comment a.s.a.p. Note: 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).

Final project design: (~1000-1500 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 8, so that's when you'll have to begin to articulate your topic and then your question. Due May 1st in class (hard copies preferred).

Take-home final: Essay format, 2-hour timed, open notebook. 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 connect with and contrast from one another.

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 = < 60

Course Policies

Absences &c.

Please plan to attend every class session. There are only 14. If you need to miss more than two of our scheduled meetings for whatever reason, please be in touch immediately to schedule a make-up tutorial with me (one-on-one or small-group, as needed) on that week's material. Failure to do so will have a depressing effect on your grade. Make-up sessions will be on Zoom and take the form of British-style tutorials: I will ask you to present an account of the assigned readings, and I will engage you in discussion about their implications. I can also let you know what discussion developed in the class you missed.

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.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism (Steinhardt policy)

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

- **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**
Students requesting reasonable accommodations due to a disability are encouraged to register with the Moses Center for students with Disabilities. You can begin the registration process by completing [Moses Center Online Intake](#). Once completed, a Disability Specialist will be in contact with you. Students requiring services are strongly encouraged to register prior to the upcoming semester or as early as possible during the semester to ensure timely implementation of any approved accommodations.
- **NYU resources like the Writing Center, the Wellness Center, the Wasserman Center, and NYU Libraries** are all working hard to support student success. Please don't be shy about asking for help in these quarters or elsewhere at NYU. Asking for help if you need it is probably the most important skill you can develop in college. **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

Jan 24 Introductions

We'll get ourselves sorted, and we'll discuss two book reviews as an initial attempt to cultivate a shared understanding of "total knowledge": Tim Wu's 2020 ["Bigger Brother"](#) (2020) and Robert Darnton's ["The Dream of a Universal Library"](#) (2023)

2

Jan 31 Role of Language (multiple perspectives)

Jorge Luis Borges, ["The Analytical Language of John Wilkins"](#) (1942)
 Robin Kimmerer, ["Learning the Grammar of Animacy"](#) (2013)
 Benjamin Lee Whorf, ["Science and Linguistics"](#) (1940)

3

Feb 7 Role of Classification/Taxonomy

Emily Drabanski ["Queering the Catalog"](#) (2013) and ["Teaching the Radical Catalog"](#) (2008)

4

Feb 14 ❤️ Encyclopedism: Presumptions, Promises, Pitfalls

Mini-excerpts from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse* (1751)
 H.G. Wells, "The Idea of a Permanent World Encyclopedia" (1937) pp. 55-59.
 Vannevar Bush, ["As We May Think"](#) (1945).

Close reading essay due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 4 PM Saturday, Feb. 17th.

5

Feb 21 Beyond Liberalism: E.g., Knowing What Not to Know in Modern China

Margaret Hillenbrand, ["Introduction: Staking out Secrecy"](#)

6

Feb 28 Wikipedia R Us: Encyclopedism Today

Michael Mandiberg, ["Wikipedia's Race and Ethnicity Gap and the Unverifiability of Whiteness"](#) (2023)
 Heather Ford and Ethan Zukerman, ["Writing the Revolution: Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age"](#) (2022) selections

7

Mar 6 Google R Us, or, Is Google Making Us Stupid?

Brin and Page, "[Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine](#)" (1998)

Frank Pasquale, "[The Hidden Logics of Search](#)" (2015)

Steve Crossan, "[The Web, Google, and Cosmograms](#)" (2017) pp. 235-9

8

Mar 13 Algorithms of Oppression

Safiya U. Noble, [Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism](#) (2018) selections

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 topics you'd like to pursue.

Spring Break

9

Mar 27 Monopolization

"[Monopoly](#)" and "[Enshittification](#)" (Wikipedia)

Cory Doctorow, "How Big Tech Went to Sh*t" (September 2023) [On the Media podcast](#) (51:34)

10

Apr 3 Infrastructural Lock-in?

Gabriele de Seta, "[QR Code : The Global Making of an Infrastructural Gateway](#)" (2023)

Denny Vrandeic, "[Collaborating on the Sum of All Knowledge Across Languages](#)" (2020)

11

Apr 10 Generative AI (Large Language Models)

Ted Chiang, "[ChatGPT Is a Blurry JPEG of the Web](#)" (February 9, 2023)

Nina Pasquini, "[Artificial Worldviews': Mapping ChatGPT's Knowledge Universe](#)" (December 13, 2023)

Additional up-to-the-moment reading TBA

12

Apr 17

We'll organize one-on-one meetings for this week instead of meeting as a group.

13

Apr 24 More on Generative AI

Eryk Salvaggio, "[How to Read an AI Image: The Datafication of a Kiss](#)" (2022) and "[The Hypothetical Image](#)" (2023)

Additional reading possible, TBA

14

May 1 Conclusion and Review for Final

Project Designs due in class (hard copy preferred).

Finals Week

May 8

Take-home final due by 5 PM (This is a timed, open-notebook, online test that you will be able to access anytime between 11:00 AM and 5:00 PM, so figure out when and where you can be alone uninterrupted.)