

## **Department of Media, Culture, and Communication**

### **MCC-UE 1200 008 Inquiry Seminar: Secrecy**

#### **Instructor and Course Information**

- Prof. Lisa Gitelman
- W 9:30-12:00 East 207

Office hours available via Zoom and in-person (East 720) by appointment; email answered promptly during business hours EST [lg91@nyu.edu](mailto: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 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. 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. Cultivate your 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](mailto:gitelman@nyu.edu) by 5 PM on Saturday, October 1<sup>st</sup>

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](mailto:gitelman@nyu.edu) by 5 PM on Tuesday in either Week 6, 7, 9, 10, or 11. You decide.

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 12/14 in class.

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 essay  
.....20%
- Final Project Design.....30%
- Take home final  
.....20%

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.**

It's still a pandemic. You may experience difficulties and—although I hope you don't—I want to be as lenient as possible about attendance and instead look for your overall engagement with the course, with the understanding that engagement may take different forms at different times. 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 in lieu of a class session. An inquiry seminar should be a learning community, and I'd like us all to keep in touch, support each other respectfully as the term progresses. We are a small community, to be sure, but collective inquiry is at least as important as the independent work we each do.

All that being said, you should plan to attend every class. If you need to miss more than two of our 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. Make-up sessions will be in the form of tutorials: I will ask you questions about the assigned readings, and I will engage you in discussion about their implications, let you know what we discussed in class. More than two un-made-up absences (for any reason) will have a depressing effect on your grade.

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**

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](mailto: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

Sept 7 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.

2

Sept 14 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

Sept 21 State Secrecy, a Primer (USA)

We will discuss Peter Galison's "[Removing Knowledge](#)" (2004) and teach ourselves a little bit about "sunshine," FOIA, and other features of the American security state. Bring examples, questions.

4

Sept 28 Wiretapping, a Primer (USA)

We'll discuss Brian Hochman, *The Listeners: A History of Wiretapping in the United States* (2022). Please read at least Hochman's [Introduction](#) and [Epilogue](#). We'll also work on examples of close reading.

Close reading essay due via email to gitelman@nyu.edu by 5 PM on Saturday, October 1<sup>st</sup>.

5

Oct 5 Secrecy and Art

We'll discuss Mary H. Nooter, "[African Art that Conceals and Reveals](#)" (1993) and pp. 192-200 from D[avid] A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (1988), Ch. 6, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets" (PDF in Brightspace)

6

Oct 12

"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 that help with the concept of public secrecy?

7

Oct 19 "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.

8

Oct 26

LARP: A Secret Film Festival

We'll use this period to plan a film festival appropriate to the theme of secrecy. Come prepared with proposals for films (what kinds of films?) to include. Make your case with trailers, clips, or other specifics. Come prepared to argue (really) and negotiate. Example: I'd like to propose that we include the 2014 feature film, [The Imitation Game](#). Based on a recent biography of Alan Turing, the film provides an opportunity to think about cryptography/secret communication *at least* in terms of Turing's work breaking the German's enigma code during WWII and in terms of his closeted life and eventual persecution for homosexuality.

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.

9

Nov 2 Meta-Secrecy?

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

10

Nov 9 Samizdat, Secret Writing, Underground Communication

We'll begin our discussion with Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "[The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat](#)" (2001), and we'll map the concept of samizdat as it appears in JSTOR.

11

Nov 16 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)

—Thanksgiving week—

12

Nov 30

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

13

Dec 7

We'll return to questions of privacy and discuss [The Right to Be Forgotten](#) (Listen for 50 minutes) as well as other materials TBA that may be relevant to your Project Designs.

14

Dec 14 Conclusion and Review for Final, Project Designs due in class (hard copy preferred).

Dec 20 Take-home final due by 5 PM