

CSU Stanislaus  
Intellectual Methods in the Humanities (HONS 3000)  
Human Interests & the Power of Information (PHIL4350) - Spring 2012

Instructor: Dr. Chris Nagel  
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Office hours: MWF 11:00-11:45, TR 9:30-10:30  
& by appointment

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NOTE: Email is my preferred non-face-to-face method of communicating.

## Course Description and Learning Objectives

Information has become the key term for describing the purposes of education and research. While advancing technology allows for ever greater accumulation and dissemination of information, what is easy to ignore is the purposes information serves, and at a still more fundamental level, what it means to pursue information. The course will focus reflective, critical attention on the connection between pursuit of information and the broader context of the human interests served by information. We will examine corporate capital and the information economy, the culture of information described by contemporary theorists, and especially our own situation within this culture, and in our everyday lives.

A student who successfully completes the course should: (1) develop and improve critical thinking skills; (2) develop and improve understanding of, appreciation for, and capacity for humanistic inquiry; (3) develop broader and deeper understanding of the issues covered in the course, in particular the multiple effects of information technology on knowledge, politics, and identity; and (4) develop and improve capacity to express ideas and present reasoning regarding course concepts and issues.

## Texts

Course reader, available through Blackboard

Plato, *Meno* (I don't care what edition, but it helps to have the marginal page numbers)

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (University of Minnesota Press)

Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Wiley-Blackwell)

Other texts, links, items of interest, things, and all manner of amusements (honest!) will be available through Blackboard.

NOTE: None of the texts have been ordered through the university bookstore. Copies of the *Meno* can be found used. Check out a local used bookstore. The Lyotard and Castells texts can be purchased online. Get the *Meno* right away.

## Course Requirements

### 1. Regular, informed, active class participation. / 10%

Participation is much more than simply showing up to class. The course is discussion-based as well as text-based. Reading the assignments for each class is a must, as well as an ongoing expectation. Participation in small-group and full-class discussions will be judged not just according to its frequency, but more importantly also on its relevance, informativeness, and insightfulness. Participation may also include brief, informal writing tasks.

### 2. Three Short Papers. /60%

These will be mainly textual explication of course material, but will also include interpretation and analysis of texts. I expect you to focus on *one* text/author in each of these papers, but you may introduce other material as part of your explication, interpretation, and analysis. I will assign the first 2 upon completing the first two parts of the course.

### 3. Final Project. / 30%

This will be an original essay, bringing together themes, texts, topics, and concepts from the course. Generally, this has involved the option of an in-class presentation of the project, as a sort of rough draft. More to follow.

## Grading Criteria For Papers

Papers will be evaluated on a 100-point scale divided into five categories, as noted in this chart.

- A. Up to 20 points for *argument*. Good arguments are clear, concise, lead from point to point, and give cogent reasons for a conclusion.
- C. Up to 20 points for establishing and articulating the *context* of the discussion.
- I. Up to 20 points for demonstrated *insightful* and thoughtful approach to the issue.
- R. Up to 20 points for *responding* relevantly and accurately to assigned readings, and other resource material.
- G. Up to 20 points for grammatical clarity, including paragraph structure. Grammatical errors and poor paragraph structure make papers difficult to understand.

## Course Expectations and General Procedure

Class sessions: My approach to teaching this course is to attempt to maximize student involvement in discussion. I run the course much more like a seminar than a lecture course. As a result, students *absolutely must* complete required reading, *on time*. When I assign a reading for a class session, I expect all students to have completed reading the assignment prior to the start of that class session, and to be prepared to discuss the reading.

Discussions in class range somewhat widely, especially when there is more student participation. In any case, I expect each student to take responsibility for understanding the key concepts and to be able to understand course material. Students should take the lead in asking for explanations, questioning concepts or argumentative reasoning, raising challenges, etc.

Reading materials: For most of my students, the kind of reading material is unfamiliar. The philosophical and other texts are often complex, as are the concepts they convey. There will be concepts and terminology that are unfamiliar. Students should make efforts of their own to come to understand the material (e.g., look up words in dictionaries, do some background reading on difficult concepts, etc.). Students should also ask questions in class or during my office hours. Students who are having severe difficulty, have a language barrier, or other specific problems with understanding should come to my office hours and get assistance—early in the semester.

Workload expectations: While some of the reading material is very difficult, much of it is not, and I believe there is a balance that is not too burdensome. Many of the articles are very short. On average (and per standards for college-level courses long established in the US), students should expect close to two hours of outside work to prepare for each hour of class time. I will distribute a list of tips for reading and preparing for class.

Communication outside of class: I prefer that students come to my office hours. Otherwise, I prefer email as a way to communicate; I do not text, and I do not like to use the phone. I will use Blackboard to send announcements to the whole class from time to time. Students should get into the habit of checking Blackboard, and their campus email accounts, most days.

## Overall Course Grade Calculation

I will assign grades on a +/- scale, as follows (percentages are always rounded up): A=91% or more; A-=90%; B+=89%; B=81-88%; B-=80%; etc. I am willing to let students change grade options until the last class day of the semester (which is the deadline set by the university).

## Some General Rules

1. *Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated!* Cheating or plagiarizing in the fulfillment of an assignment will result in failure of the assignment, and probable failure of the course. I will also, at my discretion, report your act of academic dishonesty to appropriate university officials.
2. *Late assignments* will be subject to penalty, 5 percentage points per day.
3. *Courtesy* is expected. Avoid interrupting fellow classmates; listen carefully to their arguments and respond thoughtfully. However please do feel free to make your own arguments in turn. I try to keep class informal and discussion open, but talking out of turn or dominating discussion, or making irrelevant comments, is not permissible.
4. *Tardiness* to class is strongly discouraged.
5. *Missing classes* is also discouraged. If you know you must miss a class, kindly contact me beforehand. At my discretion, I may excuse you when an absence is unavoidable and legitimate. In any event, it would be helpful to know if there were any announcements made in class (these will also usually be posted on my web page). Remember that scheduled class discussion days are mandatory; if you must miss a class discussion day you must explain your absence ahead of time to request not to lose credit for that day.
6. *Electronic communication* is not acceptable during class. This means no cell phones, text-messaging, emailing, etc. Accessing course materials on Blackboard is acceptable.
7. *Audio- or video-recording* of class sessions is prohibited without permission of the instructor.
8. *Beverages* are acceptable in class (in case you were wondering). Please avoid eating in class; popcorn is expressly forbidden.

## Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Expectations

You have the right:

- to have and to express your own opinions on issues discussed in class
- to your own interpretation of texts
- to ask questions
- to think critically
- to fair evaluation of your performance in the course, according to the grading criteria specified

You have the responsibility:

- to give a rational account for your opinions
- to read and be prepared to discuss assigned texts and course issues
- to seek answers to questions
- to be reflective (that is, to be self-critical)
- to stay up-to-date on assignments, their due dates, and material missed due to absences
- to fulfill assignments as specified (and to ask questions if you do not understand the assignments)

You are expected:

- to be honest regarding your opinions and reasoning
- to come to understand the assigned texts
- to enter into the search for answers to questions (i.e., to take part in discussions)
- to be critically rigorous (i.e., to subject opinions, interpretations, and answers to rational scrutiny, regardless of whose they are)
- to engage in class discussion in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue

## Course Outline

Activities/Theories/Themes	<b>Part One: Everyday Life in the Information Age - Information, Being Informed, Being In-formed</b>
Orientation Disorientation Phenomenology Aporia Nooz Media Whoop!	Dates (approximate): January 29-February 21 Texts include Plato, Schütz, Borges, and others  What is information? What is knowledge? What distinguishes them from one another? What gives information its value? Is American electoral politics <i>really</i> all about hair?
Post-structuralism Post-modernism Hyperreality Media saturation Advertising Efficiency Paralogy	<b>Part Two: Information Media, Society, Culture and Interpretation—Critical Social Theory, Postmodernism</b>  Dates (approximate): February 26-April 11 Texts include Marx, Baudrillard, Foucault, Lyotard, and others  Is there a media society? What is the relationship between information and advertising, television, databases, and computers in general? Are we, in fact, doomed? Given that we are doomed, what can we do about it?
Cross-cultural sociology Identity Terrorism Environmentalism Fundamentalism Ism-ism-ism	<b>Part Three: The Global Informational Society - Praxis</b>  Dates (approximate): April 16-May 16 Texts include Castells and possibly others  What structural changes in society have been wrought by the so-called informational economy? What do these systemic, systematic changes mean for us in our lived experience?

## Important Dates

April 1-5	Spring Break
May 9	Final Project due
May 17	Last day of classes

Note: All provisions of this syllabus are subject to revision, including this sentence. Any major changes will be announced in class, in advance. Minor schedule changes may occur with little or no advance notice.

## Troubled? Confused?

Please, don't hesitate to get in touch with me to discuss anything about the course, or about anything else, especially anything that is getting in the way of your success and your learning. I hope that at least some of the course material and themes are very demanding, intellectually and otherwise. The demands are only worthwhile if you have the opportunity and resources to face them, however, and I want to do anything I can to provide what you need to have both opportunity and resources.