

Cradle to Grave: Syllabus Brief

Course Description

This course critically examines data, algorithms, and related systems and infrastructures to address how data's social life impacts our human experience. Students read literature from communication, media studies, critical data studies, and science and technology studies to examine the logics, values, biases, and outcomes of data-intensive technologies commonly used in daily life. The course develops an understanding of critical social theories and introduces students to several frameworks for critical inquiry of data collection and its methods and impacts.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course students should be able to...

1. Understand and articulate the meaning of concepts commonly deployed in discussions about data science and data-intensive technologies, and the relationships between those terms;
2. Identify ethical, epistemological, and political concerns related to the use of data and algorithms in technologies that mediate common lived experiences;
3. Apply core concepts from socio-cultural theory to the critical evaluation of data-intensive research and technologies; and
4. Use qualitative analytical approaches to assess the strengths, limitations, benefits, and harms of data-intensive methods and technologies.
5. Provide thoughtful and critical reflection on the role of data-intensive and algorithmic technologies in one's own personal, educational, or professional experiences.

Course Format

Each week, students partake in various writing exercises, both formal and informal, that serve as a conduit for exploring the complexities of datafication in everyday life, its implications on various life milestones, and its broader societal impacts. Students' work culminates in a final portfolio showcasing their unique view of a digitally mediated world, where personal narratives intertwine with critical analyses to illuminate the nuanced interplay between technology, identity, and community in the age of big data. Students should also prepare to participate in weekly discussions via the Canvas discussion forums. ** Course delivery is asynchronous, but not self-paced. Students should not work too far ahead as class activities feed into one another and include peer-support activities & feedback, and instructor feedback. See course introduction "lecturette" on the revision and dialogue for full review of how activities are scaffolded across the lessons.**

Course Activities & Final Project

There are four types of activities for this course: reading quizzes, reflective writing, critical writing assessments, and discussions. These activities are designed to help guide students in preparing for the final project. Short descriptions of each activity type follow below, with expanded details on the course canvas.

Discussions (10 total @ 2 points each; 20)

Each week, students are asked to participate in the course online forum. Discussion topics will focus on the critical examination of the week's readings, case studies, and theoretical frameworks, with specific attention to their applications and implications in real-world scenarios. Weekly discussions are

intended as a collaborative space designed to help you prepare for your weekly assignment. Our goal is to use the forums as a "sandbox" for trying out different ideas or asking hard questions and clarifying nagging ones. The forums are a space for receiving help and support from peers so we can work together to understand this complex meshwork of data in everyday life.

Raw Revelations (7 total @ 4 points each; 28)

Raw Revelations constitute a series of reflective journal entries that students are required to maintain throughout the course. Through these journal entries, you will document your evolving understanding, questions, and insights related to the datafication of society and its impacts. As an informal writing space, the Raw Revelations aim to provide you with a structured yet flexible space for reflection that supports the development of critical inquiry assessed in the formal writing assignments. While prompts are provided to students, these prompts are not meant to limit the scope of your reflection. Students are welcome to expand upon the prompts and pursue inquiry or observations that resonate with them.

Data Dialogues (6 total @ 12 points each; 72)

Building on the introspective work done in the "Raw Revelations," the "Data Dialogues" assignments focus on articulating insights and critiques concerning data's social impact. These assignments are more structured explorations that ask you to consider different perspectives, genres, and audiences in writings of approximately 400-500 words.

Final Project (100 points) - Public Scholarship "Zine"

The culmination of your work of a zine, a creatively assembled publication that asks you to reimagine the role and representation of data in society. Drawing from the insights developed in the "Raw Revelations" and the articulation practice in the "Data Dialogues," students will select a topic and format that resonates with their understanding and vision. This zine is an opportunity for you to synthesize course concepts and your reflections into a tangible, creative product that shares your critiques, narratives, and visions for the future of data.

Note: During week 5, students will critically reflect on the Raw Revelation entries and Data Dialogues composed during the first half of the course to structure the topic and style of their final project. The remaining weeks (6-10) will focus on preparation of your project. There is no formal exam for this course. Rather you will finalize your final project and submit during week 11 (exam week).