Information Ethics
University of Maryland, College Park
INST610 Information Ethics, Online

Instructor: Hannah Bergman, College of Information Studies
Email: hbergma2@umd.edu

Instructor will respond to email inquiries within 24 hours, unless otherwise noted in an “out of office” message. Generally, emails will not be replied to between 8:30 am and 6:30 pm weekdays. For the quickest response send emails in the early morning hours or evening hours.

Google chat/Hangout/Phone/Skype office hours: by appointment

Course Description
Recent advances in the production, use, and management of information present many new opportunities, but also raise ethical challenges that information professionals must confront.

This course covers past, current, and future issues in information ethics, and encourages you to develop your own standpoint from which to address the diverse range of ethical challenges facing information professionals today. During the course, you will learn about a wide range of ethical theories, including non-Western and feminist theories, and you will apply these theories to confront critical information ethics issues using case-based learning.

Statement of Goals
Upon successfully completing this course, you will be able to:

- Identify key problems in information ethics and propose solutions to these problems
- Articulate your own values and understand and appreciate the values of others that drive your ethical framing
- Conduct research on specific ethical theorists and develop information ethics cases that focus on one or more contemporary information ethics issues relevant to your interests, experience, and professional trajectory

Course Format
This course is conducted online through ELMS. No onsite meetings are required, although you will meet regularly with a small group via Skype, Google Hangout, or other method that you decide. This course applies discussion-based and case-based learning approaches to information ethics. The case studies and examples presented in the course materials provide opportunities to apply abstract theories and concepts to real-world scenarios, and create a safe environment for considering and resolving ethical dilemmas.

During each module, you will be asked to reflect on the course materials for that week in online discussion boards. You are encouraged to draw on personal experiences and external literature and resources to support your commentary. You will also have the opportunity to write a paper on an ethical dilemma of interest to you.

Course Readings
Readings will be listed and uploaded to the course site.

**Coursework**
The course is made up of these key components:

**Readings:** Materials and readings can be found under “Course Materials” on the course site. The course is organized into two-week modules to provide time to read, discuss in groups, and then discuss as a class using the discussion board.

**Participation:** During each week, one group will be assigned to lead our online discussion. Your groups will be pre-assigned. You will need to work with your group members to ensure you post in advance discussion questions and prompts for the week, as well as monitor and respond to questions and colleagues from your classmates.

**50 percent of grade Discussion Board Participation:**
Each week students will prepare 300 - 500 word responses to the readings. Responses will build on discussion prompts, crystallize the authors’ key points, and offer additional questions based on the text and any relevant previous readings suitable for discussion.

In addition, during each week, each individual should post at least two replies to other students’ posts. Please be respectful and professional when you reply to each other. Be explicit about ethical perspectives that you are using to make your claims whenever possible or relevant.

**The schedule** of modules, posts, and discussion will look like this:

Monday – a new module begins  
Tuesday (midnight) – initial post of 300 to 500 words is due  
Friday (midnight) – replies are due.

Your discussion participation will be graded using the following rubric:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submission received</td>
<td>1 point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student demonstrates understanding of at least one reading</td>
<td>2 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student demonstrates understanding of at least one reading or part of a reading, provides a thoughtful discussion question for at least one reading or part of a reading</td>
<td>3 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student demonstrates understanding of the full reading assignment</td>
<td>4 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student demonstrates understanding of the full reading assignment, provides meaningful analysis, insight, and examples during discussion</td>
<td>5 points</td>
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</table>
Co-leading class discussion
Depending on enrollment, you will be expected to lead class discussion with others in your group (ideally, groups will be of 2 to 3 people, and responsible for 2 weeks during the semester). Leadership of class discussion will be assessed based on the ability to identify key questions, present a balanced overview (including all of the readings and viewpoints) and tie in topics from previous weeks.

When you co-lead a class discussion for the week, rather than post your discussion board posts, you will help steer the conversation on the discussion boards. Your group will do this by asking insightful questions that help relate the posts to overall theme of the readings and nudging the conversation toward particular topics worth highlighting that week. You can bring in current events and recent developments in the field to help inform the conversation. When leading discussion, you should be active on the discussion boards every day during the week.

Reflections: Choose two weeks and write a reflection on how the values and topics we’re studying in that module relate to your professional career. You should complete two over the course of the semester, and you may choose the modules with cases (or perspectives) that appeal to you most (modules 2-7 only). Reflections should be about 500 words. Reflections will be due at the close of the chosen module.

Reflections should: 1) explore how the topic of the module might present itself in your information career, and 2) make an argument about the right way to respond to a hard issue raised by the topic as an information professional. Reflections will be graded according to the following rubric:

Final Assignment—Ethical Audit:
Jails and prisons are overcrowded; judges’ schedules are overbooked, threatening the constitutional right to a speedy trial and putting municipal budgets under pressure. Cities and counties are challenged to maintain public safety without expanding their physical capacity to house convicted criminals. One of the ways they hope to minimize costs and social harms is to release as many accused people out on bail to await trial in the community as they can without reducing safety levels in the community. This allows those who are released to keep their jobs, maintain childcare responsibilities (if any), and otherwise continue to support themselves, their families, and their communities. These benefits must be balanced against the potential harms that occur if accused criminals are released into situations where they commit additional crimes. Judges already make these kinds of bail decisions every day. In many situations, their dockets are so full they have very little time to adjudicate any particular case. Now data-analytics companies are offering to use predictive models to give each arrestee a recidivism score that time-strapped judges can use in their rapid-fire decision making context. We look at the
company Northpointe which offers a recidivism prediction score in roughly a dozen states. Investigative journalists at ProPublica have denounced the company for producing racial bias as measured by the differential rate of false positives between whites and blacks. Northpointe has countered this accusation, arguing that their algorithm is fair, focusing attention on community protection true positives and true negatives. Students are asked to perform an audit of this case using ethical theory from weeks 2 and 3 as well as a socio-statistical assessment. How do we balance harms to society, rights to fair trials, budgets, and communities? Is any predictive analytics platform likely to lead to ethical lapses? Is a data-driven decision making strategy ethically acceptable if it outperforms the humans and organizational processes previously in place or can we develop a new ethical template for assessing the impact of data-driven decision making tools? Essays will provide historical background related to predictive policing, American attitudes towards punitive not rehabilitative policing, and carceral budgeting. They will then present an original ethical audit of the Northpointe/COMPAS algorithm ad its application. Essay length will range from 12-15 pages.

Your final assignment will be graded based on creativity, evidence of critical thinking, appropriateness, clarity of writing, and adherence to length and component requirements. It will be graded according to the following rubric:

Rubric for reflections and final assignment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of readings and issues</td>
<td>20 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive writing</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backs conclusions with evidence</td>
<td>20 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduces own ideas</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizes writing logically</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depth of analysis</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses correct grammar and punctuation</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses clear word choice and professional vocabulary</td>
<td>10 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100 pts</strong></td>
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Submit all assignments through ELMS, unless otherwise specified. If you have any issues with ELMS contact the Help Desk immediately: 301-405-1400; https://elms.umd.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_id= _300_1

**Grading**
Your work in this course will be evaluated via your group and Discussion Board participation, your reading reflections, and your final assignment. The weighted percentages for each component are listed below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluated Components</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion boards</td>
<td>End of each week</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading reflections</td>
<td>End of the relevant week</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading class discussion</td>
<td>As assigned</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics audit</td>
<td>12/14/18</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Late Submissions Policy (Assignment & Discussion Board Postings)
Late assignments will be **automatically marked down ½ grade (5 points)** for each day past the due date. Discussion boards will be made available in advance of each week to give you plenty of time to contribute to the Discussion board within the confines of your personal schedule.

**Academic Integrity**
Students are reminded that the University of Maryland has absolute expectations for academic integrity from every student. The Code of Academic Integrity strictly prohibits students from cheating on assignments, plagiarizing papers, submitting the same paper for credit in two courses without authorization, buying papers, submitting fraudulent documents, and forging signatures. Instances of any suspected academic dishonesty will be reported and handled according to University policy and procedures. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit [http://www.shc.umd.edu](http://www.shc.umd.edu). For a more detailed description of the University's definition of academic dishonesty, visit [http://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/integrity.html](http://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/integrity.html).
Accommodations for Students with Disabilities
The University is committed to providing appropriate accommodations for students with documented disabilities. In order to ascertain what accommodations should be provided to facilitate your learning experience, please be sure to inform the instructor of your needs at the beginning of the semester. The instructor will then contact relevant parties such as the University’s Disability Support Services, who will make arrangements with you to determine and implement appropriate academic accommodations. For more information on the University’s policies, see http://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/disabilities.html.

CourseEvalUM
Your participation in the evaluation of courses through CourseEvalUM is a responsibility you hold as a student member of our academic community. Your feedback is confidential and important to the improvement of teaching and learning at the University as well as to the tenure and promotion process. Please go directly to the website (http://www.courseevalum.umd.edu) to complete your evaluations at the end of the semester.

Three Keys to Success
Information Ethics is a challenging topic. Rarely are there straight forward answers to how one should address an ethical dilemma. Personal values shape the ethical approaches we take when solving information dilemmas in our everyday lives. As a result, open-mindedness and respect are critical to engaging in collegial dialog in an Information Ethics course. With this in mind, here are some tips for ensuring your success in this course:
Be courteous and respectful. The Discussion Board is a place to bring out healthy debates, but those debates should remain collegial and academic at all times – never personal.
Be timely. Posting to the Discussion Boards and submitting your mid-term and final assignments via ELMS on time show respect for your fellow cohort members, and your instructor, and are crucial to your success in this course.
Be open-minded. Information ethics is a course that allows you to explore issues from a variety of ethical perspectives. Engaging in critical thinking while reading the course materials and developing your assignments will help you gain the most from this course and will ensure a high grade in the class. Don’t be afraid to “think from” new perspectives and challenge yourself.

Syllabus Change Policy
This syllabus is a guide for the course and is subject to change with advance notice.

Week 1: Overview of ethical issues in data-driven organizations
Overview of data science as an ethical practice


Introduction to the unique ethical challenges of ‘big data’

**Week 2: Ethical Theory - Philosophical frameworks for assessing fairness**

**Early theories of fairness**
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. (1754) *Discourse on the origin and basis of inequality among men.* [Many print versions of this text have been published. Available in full here: https://www.aub.edu.lb/fas/cvsp/Documents/DiscourseonInequality.pdf]

Mill, John Stuart. (1861) *Utilitarianism.* [There are multiple published versions of this treatise - it is also available in full here: https://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm]

**Moving towards contemporary theories of fairness**


**Week 3: Research ethics for data science**

**Ethical side effects of the publish or perish system: p-hacking and small sample size**

**The misapplication of informed consent in dataveillance practices**


**Week 4: Techniques of data ethics 101**


**Getting from data to individuals: Internet traces and Geofingerprints**


Week 5: All data are human data: On the discriminatory trouble with training data


Week 6: Discrimination and algorithms
In some cases, algorithms obscure unintentional bias. In other cases, algorithmic bias is, if not intended then at least condoned obscured by company's refusal to share data with would-be third party auditors.

The ethics of price discrimination

Angwin, Julia; Larson, Jeff; Kirchner, Lauren; and Mattu, Surya. (2017, 5 April) Minority neighborhoods pay higher car insurance than white neighborhoods with the same risk. ProPublica, co-published with Consumer Reports. Accessed online https://www.propublica.org/article/minority-neighborhoods-higher-car-insurance-premiums-white-areas-same-risk

Criminal justice by algorithm


**Week 7: The philosophical challenge of thinking in categories**

*How humans explain their social worlds through perceptions and statistics*


**Social processes and the impact of categorical life**


**Week 8: Data ethics for researchers**

*Health Research*


Educational Research


Week 9: The ethics of data scraping and storage


Week 10: Mosaic data, found data, and designed data


Week 11: Privacy and Surveillance

Week 12: Special topics in surveillance: Adtech
Sweeney, Latanya. (2013, May) Discrimination in online ad delivery. Communications of
the ACM. Vol. 56(5): 44-54.


**Week 13: Special topics in surveillance: Employment**


**Week 14: Differential privacy**


**Guidance for acting ethically with data**