Instructor: Megan Finn  
Meetings: Tuesday 1:30-4:30  
Location: Parrington Hall Room 206  
Course Title: Information Infrastructure Studies (INFX 598)

Course Description:
In this seminar, we will examine the making, maintenance, and use of infrastructures for circulating information. This class covers theoretical and historical perspectives on the development of infrastructure, methods for studying infrastructure, and case studies of infrastructures. We will pay close attention to the cultural, social and political aspects of information infrastructure as we examine case studies of how vast means for circulating information developed and endured over centuries, or, equally importantly, failed.

This course will familiarize students with different conceptual approaches for considering the cultural, social and political dimensions of information infrastructures. Concepts related to information infrastructures include classification, measurement, standards, objectivity, sociality, and nationalism, amongst other things. Students will be asked to read classic analysis of information infrastructures and discuss them in a seminar style classroom setting. The class will culminate in a case study using the theoretical lenses we discuss in class. Students will be guided through the process of writing a long paper including time to workshop paper ideas and drafts.

Course Objectives:
Upon successful completion of the course, student will:
• Understand various theories and analytical frameworks for examining information infrastructure
• Utilize approaches for investigating various examples of infrastructural development, operation and failure
• Apply concepts from the course to their own research project

ASSIGNMENTS

Readings
You will need to create an account on Zotero via Zotero.org. I highly recommend downloading the desktop client. All of the readings will be available via the Zotero group as pdfs, or via links to online resources in the UW library. The weekly readings are listed in the syllabus. There will sometimes be weeks where you can select a reading from several choices. Some weeks also have “optional” readings listed – these readings are definitely not required, though may be useful for the purposes of final papers, and for weeks when you are the discussion leader. Additionally, doctoral students in the class might want to read beyond the syllabus. I will be adjusting the readings throughout the quarter to accommodate the interests of the class.

Analyze an information infrastructure
At least three of these assignments and many of the class discussions will require you to select an information infrastructure for investigation. Many of you will already have a project in mind based on ongoing research interests. Other students may have an information infrastructure that you have always wanted to spend more time considering. Others may select to investigate an information infrastructure that the professor suggests. Using the readings in this class, you will examine the cultural, political, and social dimensions of this infrastructure. I recommend selecting something for
which aspects of the infrastructure are easily available to you for analysis throughout the quarter. If you don’t have anything in mind, I have two suggestions: one is select some aspect of the data rescue project (i.e. datasets available from the EPA about clean water) and use this as a starting point to think about information infrastructure. The second suggestion is to consider USGS publication of earthquake-related data.

**WRITING**

**20% weekly writings**

1-2 pages of rough writing reflecting on ideas from the readings and applying the concepts from the readings to an information infrastructure of your choice. Ideally this writing will contribute to your final paper. These should be posted to Canvas 24 hours before class as part of the weekly discussion. After you post your thoughts, please take the time to peruse your classmates’ writing.

**30% paper: 3000-6000 word paper.**

Your paper can take many forms:

1. Analyze an information infrastructure utilizing the constructs developed in the readings in this class. You should develop your analysis of an information infrastructure using original analysis of the infrastructure using primary documents, interviews, and other sources. In the final paper, you will expand your analysis of your information infrastructure using 2-3 concepts covered in the class.

2. Review literature on a historic information infrastructure. Examine this historical information infrastructure from the perspectives of some of the concepts developed in the class. You may incorporate primary or secondary sources into your analysis of the historic information infrastructure.

3. Explore a single concept from infrastructure studies throughout some of the literature assigned in this class. If you decide to select this option, I would expect that you read beyond the literature assigned in this class to consider a concept more broadly. Another option would be to read three to four books associated with the course content, and trace that concept through those works.

4. Write a paper that shows how your research extends the concepts and theories associated with information infrastructure explored in this class. This is an advanced option.

This paper can be done with a partner or on your own. I will periodically ask for updates on your paper in class. I expect that this paper will be a well-researched first draft of a paper to be submitted to a conference, journal, or dissertation chapter. Please check in with me either in person, or over email in the first few weeks of the class to discuss your plans for the paper. Your final paper should have an argument and utilize the concepts developed throughout the quarter.

**CLASSROOM**

**20% presentation of the readings/discussion leader**

Working in groups of 1-2, you will facilitate a discussion about the readings for the week. First, you will present the readings of the week. The presentation of the readings should summarize the readings, explain who the authors are and what they are trying to argue, what kind of evidence the authors use to make their arguments, and then connect the readings to other themes in the course. I expect that you will do one or two “optional” readings (ideally to be discussed with the instructor).

You will then facilitate a conversation about the readings. Facilitating a conversation involves: 1) creating a discussion thread about the readings of the week, and posting some questions about the
readings to our course discussion board by Wednesday at 11:59PM the week before class meets, 2) responding to, commenting on, extending, and connecting the posted comments from your classmates – this can be done online and/or during class time 3) coming up with a series of discussion prompts generated from the readings and the online writing that you will use to facilitate a 30 minute conversation in class. This in-class conversation can be whole group, small groups, or some combination -- however you/your team feels is most appropriate.

20% analysis of an information infrastructure using the concepts in the readings of the week
Working in groups of 1-2, you will create a 30-minute presentation about the particular content as applied to an existing or historical information infrastructure. This can involve explaining how to apply these concepts in your own investigation of an information infrastructure. The presentation must be interactive, involve an activity for participants, connect to the readings for the week, and should involve some kind of sharing of evidence/data with the class. Ideally, you can share the infrastructure that you are studying with the class and invite the rest of the class to join you in your analysis.

10% participation in online discussions and in class discussion
I expect that everyone will come to class having done the readings and participate in class discussions. Unexcused absences will result in very low participation grades.

Week 1: Course structure, concepts, overview


Optional:

Week 2: Urban infrastructures


**Week 3: Visibilities and invisibilities: Studying information infrastructure**


**Choose 1:**


OR


**Week 4: Classification (and Objectivity)**


**Optional:**


**Week 5: Standards**


**Optional:**


**Week 6: Measurement**


**Choose 1:**

OR

OR


**Optional:**


**Week 7: governments, nations, nationalism, colonialism**


**Optional:**


**Week 8: Algorithms and Platforms**


**Optional:**


**Week 9: Space**


Massey, Doreen. Space, Place, and Gender. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. [Chapter 8: Space, Place, Gender]

**Week 10: Time**


**Optional:**


**Week 10: Final paper presentation and end of the year party**

Prepare a short presentation about your paper for the class.