

# **Information Ethics (Info 679)**

College of Computing & Informatics, Drexel University  
**Course Syllabus, Summer 2018**

Cross-listed sections 001 and 900  
Online and face-to-face

## **Instructor**

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Office hours by appt.

## **Course Overview**

Ethics is, simply put, the question of how to live. *Information ethics*, then, examines living with information technology. This course presents the philosophical foundations of information ethics (including computing, data and management), focusing on the uses and abuses of information, human moral agency in relation to new information and communication technologies, and the meaning of social responsibility in the global information society.

## **Purpose within the program**

This course will help you build a foundation for ethical reasoning as an information professional. This course is designed for MS students in cybersecurity, information systems, and library and information science. It teaches the analysis and formulation of ethical arguments, and relates information ethics to professional decision-making and public policy.

## **Expected learning outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze current ethical issues facing the information professions
- Use major and alternative traditions of ethics to engage contemporary dilemmas
- Evaluate and articulate arguments regarding professional decision making
- Interpret the professional and scholarly literature of information ethics
- Recognize the ethical challenges of contemporary information trends and extrapolate the future direction of the information ethics field

Additionally, students should have:

- Developed their own ethical (and critical) thinking (in the ongoing endeavor to *know thyself*)
- Learned how to identify an issue, reflect on it, and make a moral decision

## **Course structure**

This course has two sections under one roof: one online and asynchronous, and another that meets in person on Mondays. The course makes use of Drexel Learn (a.k.a. Blackboard or BbL, [learn.dcollege.net](http://learn.dcollege.net)). This is where assignments will be submitted and discussion will take place. The course is organized into topical weeks, each ending on Sunday. This is a seminar-style course, meaning it is centered around readings and discussion.

## Contacting me

Student-instructor interaction is an important part of any course. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, problems, discoveries, ideas or anything else. If you are in Philadelphia, I would be happy to meet with you in person.

If your question may be of interest to others in the class (e.g., syllabus, readings, schedule, etc.), please post it on the *Raise Your Hand* Discussion Board so that others can benefit. With personal or urgent questions, you should email me directly ([tjg68@drexel.edu](mailto:tjg68@drexel.edu)). It would be helpful if you put "Info679" in the subject line. If you have a technical question, you will be better off contacting the IT Group. See <http://www.drexel.edu/irt/help/learn> or call (215) 895-1224.

## Readings, Participation, Assignments and Grading

Ethics is not easy. We may think that we inherently know right from wrong, good from evil. But real-life situations can be messier than they at first appear, and messier still is determining what principles underlie our values and actions. **This is a very demanding course that requires a commitment to close reading, contemplation and writing.** Be prepared.

In addition to close reading, this course involves ongoing participation and three written assignments. All assignments will be submitted online, due by 11:59 p.m. Eastern on the specified Sunday. Meeting deadlines is an important professional responsibility; grades for work submitted late will be lowered one full letter grade per week late. Work submitted more than three weeks late will not be accepted. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis.

Your final grade will be calculated according to the following scheme:

Assignment	Percent of Grade
Class participation	40%
Code of ethics reflection	10%
<i>The Circle</i> essay	25%
Final paper	25%

## Reading

As mentioned, this course involves a lot of reading. Give yourself ample time to read—and keep in mind that you will need to read some things more than once. There are two required texts:

- The first is *The Thinker's Guide to Ethical Reasoning* (Paul & Elder, 2013). It is [available to buy from the Critical Thinking Group](#). We will be reading it in Week 3, so have this on hand by then.
- The second required text is *The Circle*, by Dave Eggers (2013). Any edition is fine. It can be found cheaply secondhand if you'd like to buy it—else you can surely find it at your local library.

Additionally, we will be reading a number of articles which will be available freely on the web or in the Course Materials section on Drexel Learn. Full references are given below.

## Class participation

The major substance of this course will be class participation. You will be expected to be present, be prepared and participate each week. If you will miss a week, please let me know ahead of time. If you are ill or have another compelling reason to be absent for more than a brief period, please

notify me as soon as you can. In the schedule below, you will notice that “Discussion” is listed as an assignment each week; what this means depends on which section you are in:

Face-to-face students	Online students
Discussion questions for each reading	Discussion board posts (6 or more)
Summary of assigned reading	Written reflection
In-class discussion	

As a student in this course, you will be expected to show professionalism, open-mindedness, reflection, intellectual humility, careful preparation, punctuality, clear communication and, most especially, a willingness to learn.

**Face-to-face students:** At each meeting, we will discuss that week’s readings, things we have found in the news, etc. For each assigned reading, bring a discussion question to the class about that reading. You may use your question to link the question to current events, other readings, etc. Additionally, the discussion of each reading will begin with a summary presented by a student; we will take turns volunteering for this on a week-by-week basis. Your attendance and contribution to the discussion each week will suffice for your class participation grade. You do not have to contribute to the online discussion boards, but you are welcome to do so if you want. If you will be absent any week, you can participate in the online discussion instead.

**Online students:** Each week, you will submit a one-page reflection on that week’s readings. These should go beyond mere summary to incorporate your job, life experience and current events as relevant. Additionally, you will take part in class discussions through the discussion boards on Drexel Learn, in which you will have the opportunity to discuss the weekly readings and to share related questions or observations with others. Each Monday, I will post prompts for discussion to get things started. You should post at least six posts each week—one of these as an original topic question, and five as responses to others’ questions. When you create your original topic, please give it a relevant title (e.g., in the form of a question), rather than something like “Smith Week 3 Discussion Topic.” You may contribute to each week’s discussion at any time during the week; but please do not wait till Sunday night to make your first contribution for the week, as doing so would be inimical to meaningful dialogue. Posts are expected to be substantive—at least a paragraph. They should reference class readings, including those from previous weeks, and they should incorporate your own analysis and perspective.

## Overview of the written assignments

There are three written assignments in this course. First, you will examine professional codes of ethics in the information field and write a short reflection paper that culminates in your own personal code of ethics (due in Week 3). Second, you will write a personal essay reflecting on the themes in the novel *The Circle* and incorporating content from our readings and discussion so far (due in Week 6). Last, you will write a capstone paper (in lieu of a final exam) analyzing an information ethics-related topic of your choosing. For this paper, a proposal will be due in Week 8 and the final paper will be due during exam week. Specific instructions and guidance on these assignments will be provided separately.

## Standards for written work

All written work should be formatted according to the American Psychological Association (APA) sixth-edition style guide. If you do not already own it, I recommend you purchase a copy of *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed., published in 2010). These can be purchased cheaply secondhand. This is the standard style guide for writing in the social sciences, including information science and systems, and it will come in handy in other courses and perhaps throughout your career. The manual provides guidance on clear and correct writing as well as in-text citation conventions and reference list citation style. You may also consult online resources for formatting, such as Purdue Owl (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/>), but be warned that online sources vary in their up-to-dateness and accuracy.

You will be graded according to the Universal Intellectual Standards published by the Critical Thinking Community. As such, your grade will depend on how well you responded to the requirements of the assignment (relevance), the quality of your argument (clarity, logic and fairness), your grasp of the subject matter (accuracy and precision), the depth of your analysis, and the effective use of the literature to support your arguments and observations (breadth). Moreover, I expect your work to be well-written (as befitting a graduate-level course); your grade will take into account grammar, readability and spelling in addition to content. If you are interested in improving your writing, I recommend the book *The Sense of Style*, by Steven Pinker (2014).

## Grades

You can expect to receive grades and feedback within a week of the assignment's due date. Grades for participation will be tallied every few weeks. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Your final grade for the course is assigned as follows:

A+	98–100%	A – Excellent. Goes above and beyond. Original thinking.
A	94–98%	Creatively synthesizes class readings and discussions with additional readings, reflections and observations. Strongly supports arguments with evidence and citations.
A–	90–94%	
B+	87–90%	B – Good. Demonstrates understanding of the facts and concepts presented in class. Few misapprehensions. Most arguments are well-supported.
B	83–87%	
B–	80–83%	
C+	77–80%	C – Acceptable. Meets most expectations, but some material is misapprehended or ignored.
C	73–77%	
C–	70–73%	
D+	67–70%	D – Poor. Demonstrates faulty understanding of significant portions of course material.
D	60–67%	
F	0–60%	F – Failing. Deep misunderstandings, poor attention.

# Policies

## Academic honesty, plagiarism and cheating

You are expected to conduct yourself in a respectful manner as befitting the university environment. This includes academic honesty. In this course, as with any Drexel course, cheating will not be tolerated. This includes plagiarism (using others' intellectual work without reference).

All work you submit must be your own work, with sources properly cited. Any plagiarism or other academic dishonesty will result in a sanction that may range from an F on the assignment to an F for the course, depending on the severity of the plagiarism. I am obligated to report incidents of cheating (including plagiarism) to Drexel administration. A student who is found in violation twice (even if in two different courses) will be expelled from the university. For more information, please refer to the Provost academic dishonesty policy at [http://www.drexel.edu/provost/policies/academic\\_dishonesty.asp](http://www.drexel.edu/provost/policies/academic_dishonesty.asp) or to resources regarding Student Conduct and Community Standards at [http://www.drexel.edu/studentlife/community\\_standards/overview/](http://www.drexel.edu/studentlife/community_standards/overview/).

If you are keen on avoiding unintentional plagiarism, the Drexel University Libraries offer several tutorials for avoiding plagiarism, which can be found at <http://www.library.drexel.edu/resources/tutorials/plagiarism/plagiarism.html>.

## Changes to the syllabus

I reserve the right to make changes to this course or its syllabus during the quarter if circumstances warrant such a change. Topics, readings and dates are subject to change, but only if necessary. Additional topics may be discussed as issues and ideas arise in the news and on the Discussion Board. All changes will be provided to students in writing as far in advance as possible.

## Dropping the course

If you are considering whether to continue your enrollment in the course, please refer to the Course Add/Drop Policy, the Course Withdrawal Policy, or other relevant policy made available by the Office of the Provost at [http://www.drexel.edu/provost/policies/course\\_drop.asp](http://www.drexel.edu/provost/policies/course_drop.asp) or <http://www.drexel.edu/provost/policies/overview/>.

## Research assistance

Individualized advising on research and APA citation is available from your Drexel University Libraries-appointed CCI librarian, Tim Siftar, at [siftar@drexel.edu](mailto:siftar@drexel.edu).

## Student conduct

Drexel University adopted a student conduct policy requiring that all students have the responsibility to be aware of, and abide by, the University's policies, rules, regulations, and standards of conduct. The Student Conduct and Community Standards policy information is available in the Official Student Handbook at [http://drexel.edu/studentlife/community\\_standards/studentHandbook/](http://drexel.edu/studentlife/community_standards/studentHandbook/).

## Support for students with disabilities

Students requesting accommodations due to a disability at Drexel University need to request a current Accommodations Verification Letter (AVL) in the [ClockWork database](#) before

accommodations can be made. These requests are received by Disability Resources (DR), who then issues the AVL to the appropriate contacts. For additional information, visit the DR website at [drexel.edu/oed/disabilityResources/overview/](http://drexel.edu/oed/disabilityResources/overview/), or contact DR for more information by phone at (215) 895-1401, or by email at [disability@drexel.edu](mailto:disability@drexel.edu).

## **Support for equality and diversity**

Drexel University strives to promote an environment of equality of opportunity and compliance with University policies and federal, state and local laws prohibiting discrimination based upon race, color, religion, gender, marital status, pregnancy, national origin, age, disability and veteran status. Students, faculty, and staff with questions about or complaints concerning discrimination, harassment, and/or retaliation should contact the Office of Equality and Diversity at (215) 895-1405 or <http://www.drexel.edu/oed/>.

## **Time management**

Drexel University assumes that each credit-unit requires four hours of work per week (i.e., a 3-unit course means a student will spend 12 hours per week on that course), including reading, participation and completing assignments. This is a three-credit course. Please plan accordingly.

## **Course evaluations**

Student evaluations are a required element of every course. Evaluation forms are completely anonymous. They are confidentially used to make improvements in the curriculum and teaching. They are also used by administration in evaluating faculty performance, and in decisions about promotion, tenure and retention. Please take part in course evaluations.

You will also be invited to take part in a separate, mid-term evaluation of the course. This is especially valuable as it will give me (anonymous!) feedback for improving the course while you are still in it, or for reinforcing the aspects of the course that you find helpful.

## **Additional Resources**

As you become acquainted with the key issues, concept and scholarship in information ethics, you may be interested in learning about related organizations. Most of these have mailing lists that you might subscribe to. They may also provide ideas for assignments and discussion. Here are some organizations whose websites you can browse:

- Center for Democracy and Technology: <http://cdt.org>
- Center for Digital Democracy: <http://www.democraticmedia.org>
- Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions: <http://ethics.iit.edu>
- Committee on Publication Ethics: <https://publicationethics.org>
- Chilling Effects Clearinghouse: <http://www.chillingeffects.org>
- Data & Society: <https://datasociety.net>
- Electronic Frontier Foundation: <http://www.eff.org>
- Electronic Privacy Information Center: <http://www.epic.org>
- Federation of American Scientists Project on Government Secrecy: <http://www.fas.org/sgp>
- Open Data Institute: <https://theodi.org>

# Course Schedule

In this course, the weeks run Monday to Sunday. Written assignments are due on Sunday at the end of the given week by 11:59 p.m. EDT. (Exception: The final exam is due on a Saturday!) Note that the face-to-face section meets Monday evenings (i.e., the first day of each week) and all reading should be done prior to class.

Week	Dates (M-Su)	Topic	Assignments Due
1	<b>Jun 25 to Jul 1</b>	Foundations of information ethics	Discussion
2	<b>Jul 2 to 8</b>	Ethical challenges and the information professions	Discussion
3	<b>Jul 9 to 15</b>	Critical thinking and ethical reasoning	Code of ethics reflection Discussion
4	<b>Jul 16 to 22</b>	Selfhood and social media	Discussion
5	<b>Jul 23 to 29</b>	Moral imagination	Discussion
6	<b>Jul 30 to Aug 5</b>	Privacy, access and security	<i>The Circle</i> essay Discussion
7	<b>Aug 6 to 12</b>	Intellectual property	Discussion
8	<b>Aug 13 to 19</b>	Big data and algorithms	Final paper proposal Discussion
9	<b>Aug 20 to 26</b>	Research and design	Discussion
10	<b>Aug 27 to Sep 2</b>	Global information ethics	Discussion
	<b>Sep 8</b>		Final paper

## Week 1 (Jun 25–Jul 1)

### Foundations of information ethics

*Key concepts: ethics and morality, human rights, information ethics*

Mastin, L. (2008). Ethics. *The basics of philosophy*. Available at [http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_ethics.html](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html)

Floridi, L. (2013). Ethics after the information revolution. In *The ethics of information* (pp. 1–18). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

United Nations. (1948). Universal declaration of human rights. Available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

*Skim:* Floridi, L. (2013). What is information ethics? In *The ethics of information* (pp. 19–28). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

*Skim:* Unesco. (2014). *WSIS+10 outcome documents* (pp. 9–48). Geneva, Switzerland: International Telecommunication Union. Available at <http://www.itu.int/net/wsis/implementation/2014/forum/inc/doc/outcome/362828V2E.pdf>

## **Week 2 (Jul 2–8)**

### **Ethical challenges and the information professions**

*Key concepts: codes of ethics, professional ethics, public sphere, constraints and affordances*

- Brey, P. (2018). The strategic role of technology in a good society. *Technology in Society*, 52(1), 39–45.
- Fallis, D. (2007). Information ethics for twenty-first century library professionals. *Library Hi Tech*, 25(1), 23–36.
- Floridi, L. (2018). Soft ethics and the governance of the digital. *Philosophy & Technology*, 31(1), 1–8.
- Skim: Capurro, R. (2000). Ethical challenges of the information society in the 21st century. *The International Information & Library Review*, 32, 257–276.

## **Week 3 (Jul 9–15)**

### **Critical thinking and ethical reasoning**

*Key concepts: ethical dilemmas, values, convergence and fragmentation, pseudo-ethics*

- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2013). *The thinker's guide to ethical reasoning*. Tomales, CA: Foundations for Critical Thinking Press.
- Nagel, T. (1979). The fragmentation of value. In *Mortal questions* (pp. 128–141). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

## **Week 4 (Jul 16–22)**

### **Selfhood and social media**

*Key concepts: self, liberalism, bullshit, virtues*

- Ess, C. (2010). The embodied self in a digital age. *Nordicom Information*, 32(2–3), 105–118.
- Frankfurt, H. (1986/2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Available at [http://www5.csudh.edu/ccaughen/576f12/frankfurt\\_harry\\_on\\_bullshit.pdf](http://www5.csudh.edu/ccaughen/576f12/frankfurt_harry_on_bullshit.pdf)
- Lanchester, J. (2017, August 17). You are the product. *London Review of Books*, 39(16). Available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n16/john-lanchester/you-are-the-product>
- Parrish, J. L., Jr. (2010). PAPA knows best: Principles for the ethical sharing of information on social networking sites. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12(2), 187–193.
- Optional: Capurro, R. (1996). Information technology and technologies of the self. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 5(2), 19–28.

## **Week 5 (Jul 23–29)**

### **Moral imagination**

*Key concepts: moral imagination, dystopia*

- Eggers, D. (2013). *The circle*. New York, NY: Random House.

## **Week 6 (Jul 30–Aug 5)**

### **Privacy, access and security**

*Key concepts: privacy, privacy paradox, utilitarianism, rights and obligations*

- This week, in addition to doing the readings, please complete the Privacy Paradox five-day challenge from WNYC Studios' *Note to Self* podcast. Each day consists of a short audio podcast and an online activity. See <https://project.wnyc.org/privacy-paradox/>
- Warren, S. D., & Brandeis, L. D. (1890/2005). The right to privacy. In Moore, A.D. (Ed.). *Information ethics: Privacy, property, and power* (pp. 209-225). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Tirosh, N. (2017). Reconsidering the 'Right to be Forgotten' – memory rights and the right to memory in the new media era. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 644–660.
- Jayakar, K. (2017). Universal broadband: Option, right or obligation? *Journal of Human Values*, 24(1), 11–24.
- Optional:* Doyle, T. (2001). A utilitarian case for intellectual freedom in libraries. *The Library Quarterly*, 71(1), 44–71.

## **Week 7 (Aug 6–12)**

### **Intellectual property**

*Key concepts: ownership, scholarly communication, copyright, indigenous knowledge*

- Lessig, L. (2010, January 26). For the love of culture. *The New Republic*. Available at <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-love-culture>
- Barry, C. (2015, April 13). Is downloading really stealing? The ethics of digital piracy. *The Conversation*. Available at <https://theconversation.com/is-downloading-really-stealing-the-ethics-of-digital-piracy-39930>
- Orozco, D., & Poonamallee, L. (2014). The role of ethics in the commercialization of indigenous knowledge. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 119(2), 275–286.
- Harley, D. (2013, October 4). Scholarly communication: Cultural contexts, evolving models. *Science*, 342(6154), 80–82.
- Skim:* Liu, L. G., & Gee, H. (2017). Determining whether commercial publishers overcharge libraries for scholarly journals in the fields of science, technology, and medicine, with a semilogarithmic econometric model. *The Library Quarterly*, 87(2), 150–172.

## **Week 8 (Aug 13–19)**

### **Big data and algorithms**

*Key concepts: AI, fake news, cognitive bias, opacity*

- Burrell, J. (2016). How the machine “thinks”: Understanding opacity in machine learning algorithms. *Big Data & Society*, 3(1), 1–12.
- Pichai, S. (2018, June 7). AI at Google: Our principles. *The Keyword*. Available at <https://blog.google/topics/ai/ai-principles>

- Sullivan, M. C. (2018). Why librarians can't fight fake news. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, OnlineFirst. doi: 10.1177/0961000618764258
- Zwitter, A. (2014). Big data ethics. *Big Data & Society*, 1(2), 1–6. Available at <http://doi.org/10.1177/2053951714559253>
- Skim: Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151.

## **Week 9 (Aug 20–26)**

### **Research and design**

*Key concepts: value sensitive design, leadership*

- Albrechtslund, A. (2007). Ethics and technology design. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 9(1), 63–72.
- Ricks, T.E. (2012). What ever happened to accountability? *Harvard Business Review*, 90(10), 93–100.
- Zimmer, M. (2010). “But the data is already public”: On the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12(4), 313–325.
- Optional:* van de Poel, I. (2013). Translating values into design requirements. In D. Michelfelder, N. McCarthy, & D. Goldberg (Eds.), *Philosophy and engineering: Reflections on practice, principles and process* (pp. 253–266). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

## **Week 10 (Aug 26–Sep 2)**

### **Global information ethics**

*Key concepts: information society, global and intercultural, justice*

- Brey, P. (2007). Is information ethics culture-relative? *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction*, 3(3), 12–24.
- Britz, J. J. (2008). Making the global information society good: A social justice perspective on the ethical dimensions of the global information society. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(7), 1171–1183.
- Floridi, L. (2013). Global information ethics. In *The ethics of information* (pp. 292–304). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pohle, J. (2015). Unesco and Infoethics: Seeking global ethical values in the information society. *Telematics and Informatics*, 32(2), 381–390.