

PL307 History of Data

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

Our current era of "Big Data" is not without precedent. Throughout the course of human history, various societies have experienced times of information and data explosion precipitated by the advent of new technologies as well as social and epistemic shifts. Previously unquantifiable, unrepresentable, invalid, and inconsequential knowledge became relevant and authoritative, and was subsequently used for reference, analysis, and calculation, informing not only political discourse and decision-making, but also efforts to comprehend the patterns of our universe.

What defined data across knowledge cultures? What were the key technological developments that caused episodes of data acceleration in the past? How did different data practices, such as data collection, analysis, and representation, shape the ways in which data has been used and understood? What was the role of data in the shaping of power dynamics in colonial empires and nation-states? Our course will examine the epistemologies, technologies, practices, and politics of data in disparate global contexts. We will begin with the earliest forms of data storage and transmission, such as cuneiform writing and early forms of statistics. We will look at how the invention of printing, the spread of literacy and the development of technologies such as land surveying gave rise to new ideals of governance and bolstered the power of nation-states. We will also study the more recent technological advances that have made the big data of our time possible, such as computers, the Internet, and the cloud.

In addition to lectures and discussions, the course will include readings from primary and secondary sources, as well as case studies and guest lectures from experts in the field. By the end of the course, students will have a deeper understanding of the historical context and evolution of the contemporary concept of "Big Data" and will be equipped to critically evaluate the current discourse around data and its implications for society today.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require

documentation. Each further absence without explanation will be penalized by the loss of twenty percentage grade in “attendance and participation” (see “Grade Breakdown”).

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

Students will be evaluated by two writing assignments, one oral presentation, attendance, and participation in classroom discussion. Detailed prompts and rubrics for the writing assignments will be provided in class. Presentations will be judged on content, organization, visual aids, and delivery. The assessed elements of participation will be focusing on the brief presentation of set readings and in-class discussions.

Assignments

For the two papers, students are encouraged to formulate their own topic, which should be based on the readings and discussions of each week, after consultation with the course convener. Papers should be typed in 12-point font and double-spaced with 2.5 cm margins. They should include a title, your name, and the date of submission on the first page, page numbers on each page, and the number of words at the end. The word count excludes the bibliography and any appendices. Sources should be cited properly and listed in a bibliography at the end of the paper. You are encouraged to use the Chicago format. Refer to the Chicago Manual of Style Online (https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html) for guidelines. Other citation styles are also acceptable, as long as you follow one format consistently.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors’ office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Element of assessment	Weighting (%)	Length
Mid-term paper	20	2000 words
Final paper	35	3000 words
Oral presentation	15	15 min.
Attendance and participation	30	n/a

Schedule

(Jan. 29): Course Introduction: Why Do Data Have Histories?

(Feb. 5): Premodern Data Regimes and Practices

Kaplan, Frédéric, and Isabella di Lenardo. "Big Data of the Past." *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* 4 (May 29, 2017): 12.

(Feb. 12): Early Modern Data: The Song Empire

Chaffee, John W., and Denis Twitchett. *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 5, Sung China, 960–1279 AD, Part 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Chapter 3.

(Feb. 19): Early Modern Data: European Empires

Blair, Ann, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton. *Information: A Historical Companion*. Princeton University Press, 2021. Chapter 6.

(Feb. 26): Early Modern Data and Capitalism

Information: A Historical Companion- Chapter 5.

(March 4): The Long 19th Century: Census and the Modern State

Heide, Lars. *Punched-Card Systems and the Early Information Explosion, 1880–1945*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Chapter 1.

(March 11): The Origins of Our Big Data: Statistical Thinking

Desrosières, Alain. *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*. Translated by Camille Naish. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. Introduction.

(March 18): The Origins of Our Big Data: Colonialism

Scott, James C. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998. Chapter 1.

Spring Break

(April 8): Information Circles, Public Opinion, and Propaganda

Information: A Historical Companion. Chapter 11.

(April 15): The Information Revolution

Floridi, Luciano. *Information: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Chapter 1.

(April 22): Data Colonialism

Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. Preface.

(April 29): Postcolonial Data Politics

Isin, Engin, and Evelyn Ruppert. "Data's Empire: Postcolonial Data Politics." In *Data Politics*, 207–27. London: Routledge, 2019.

(May 6): Speculative Futures for Data / Presentation

The Costs of Connection. Chapter 6.

Essay Deadlines

Mid-term Paper: March 17, 2024 (23:59)

Final Paper: May 5, 2024 (23:59)

Library and Book Purchase Policies

Students are not obligated to purchase any books for this seminar course. Short, curated excerpts will be provided, as deemed appropriate.