

INFO 619: INFORMATION & HUMAN RIGHTS

Semester: Fall 2025

Section: 01

Credits: 3.0

Prerequisites/Restrictions: None

Location: Pratt Manhattan Center, Room 611

Meeting Dates & Times: Tuesdays, 3:00 PM - 5:50 PM

- 3:00–4:00 (60 min) → lecture or presentations (instructor, guest, or peers)
- 4:00–4:20 (20 min) → break
- 4:20–5:50 (90 min) → active learning (discussion, workshops, activities)

INSTRUCTOR & CONTACT

Rebecca Williams, JD

Visiting Assistant Professor

Office Hours: TBD (by appointment)

Email: rebecca.williams@pratt.edu

DESCRIPTION

Catalog description. As information technologies make information more available, people rely and expect information to support their social interactions, education, employment, civic participation and other aspects of their lives and to view information as a de facto right. This course will provide students with in-depth understanding of information as a human right and will equip them to understand how to use and communicate law, technology, professional standards and information sources to promote information rights and equitable access to users. The course will begin by exploring the right to information as human right by examining the legal and ethical support it information rights. We will examine how information affects social, cultural, economic and legal structures and improves people's lives. Similarly, we will answer these questions by examining cases in both the United States and abroad and providing tools to assist specific communities. The course will explore the importance of information to humans political, social and economic rights through a series of past and current case studies.

Guiding questions. This course explores information as a human right: how it has been framed, contested, denied, and reclaimed. Students will critically examine both the harms and possibilities of information systems, with attention to the following questions:

- **Information as a Right:** *What ethical, legal, and governance frameworks recognize information as a human right?*

- **Information as a Harm:** *In what ways do information systems actively harm human rights?*
- **Information as an Enabler:** *How can information practices and infrastructures expand or protect human rights?*
- **Synthesis – Information & Human Rights Today:** *How do the roles of information as a right, a harm, and an enabler intersect in practice?*

By the end of the course, students will be able to...

- Evaluate ethical, legal, and governance frameworks for information as a human right.
- Critically analyze how information systems violate rights across domains such as labor, housing, health, policing, and public benefits.
- Conduct case study evaluations and link current events to human rights frameworks.
- Identify and design interventions that expand rights and collective power (e.g., FOIA, archives, accessibility, obfuscation, advocacy visualization).
- Apply human rights frameworks to contemporary issues in technology and policy.
- Produce original research or creative work that critiques or enables information rights.

READINGS & RESOURCES

All readings and links to course materials will be provided in the **Shared Drive**. Assignments will be posted and submitted through **Canvas**, and the **Syllabus Semester Outline (this document)** is the best place to check for any updates to the schedule. No materials need to be purchased. Additional readings may be introduced to align with current events and student interests, and students are encouraged to suggest relevant resources throughout the semester.

COMMUNITY PRACTICES

This course addresses difficult topics, including surveillance, censorship, and human rights abuses. Some materials may reference violence or contain disturbing content. Trigger warnings will be provided when appropriate, and alternative assignments can be arranged if needed. You are encouraged to step out, request alternatives, or journal as needed. We will support one another and respect the diverse experiences everyone brings to the classroom.

COURSE WORK & EVALUATION

This course balances short writing, presentations, a larger final project, and reflective work. You will complete three short essays, each paired with a lightning presentation (about 6 minutes, so ten students can present in a one-hour block). The final project may be a research paper, policy brief, or creative/media project with an analytic statement; it will be workshopped in Week 14 and presented in Week 15 (about 15 minutes each, fitting ten students into a full class session). In addition, your grade includes participation and discussion, a brief end-of-term reflection, and ongoing journaling to connect weekly readings to your ideas. *See Course Work and Evaluation Criteria below for details on grading.*

COURSE WORK		
Assignment	Weight	Description
Section Essays ×3	40% (~13% each)	Three short essays (3–4 pages), each paired with a lightning presentation (~6 minutes).
Final Project	25%	A research paper, policy brief, or creative/media project with analytic statement (10–15 pages or equivalent). Workshopped in Week 14 and presented in Week 15 (~15 minutes each). Must analyze how information functions as a right , a harm , and an enabler .
Participation & Discussion	20%	Attendance, demonstration of completed readings, active discussion, and peer feedback.
End-of-Term Reflection	10%	A short synthesis (3–4 pages) across the three sections of inquiry.
Journaling	5%	Ongoing notes connecting readings to assignments and projects; graded credit/no credit based on completion.

EVALUATION RUBRIC			
Criteria	Strong (A range) (A: 93–100 / A-: 90–92)	Proficient (B range) (B+ 87–89 / B 83–86 / B- 80–82)	Developing (C or below) (C+ 77–79 / C 73–76 / C- 70–72 / D 60–69 / F <59)
Argument	Clear, focused, and well-supported	Understandable but somewhat unclear or underdeveloped	Unclear or missing
Use of Readings & Evidence	Engages fully with readings and integrates evidence	Uses some readings, but uneven	Little to no evidence or engagement
Originality	Offers fresh insights or a creative approach	Some original thought, mostly conventional	Minimal or no originality
Connection to Course Themes	Connects clearly to human rights, ethics, and information	Partial or surface connection	Off-topic or no connection
Organization & Presentation	Well-structured, polished writing/presentation	Generally clear, but could be better organized	Disorganized or incomplete
Attribution	All sources cited properly	Minor issues with citation	Missing or improper citation

POLICIES

AI POLICY

1. You will never be required to use AI.
2. I will not use AI to grade your work.
3. Work created with generative AI will likely lead to a lower grade due to lack of depth, originality, and attribution. See *Evaluation Rubric*.
4. If you use AI, you must trace its claims to sources, cite them, and remain accountable for the information. See *Attribution Policy*.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

- *Allowed Absences*: Regular attendance is expected for this course. Students may miss up to **two classes without penalty**.
- *Additional Absences*: Repeated absences may lower your participation grade and make it difficult to meet the course learning outcomes. In general, after 3–4 absences your participation grade will be affected, and after 5 or more absences you may not be able to pass the course.
- *Make-Up Option*: Students may use **one make-up opportunity** during the semester. To make up a class, submit a **1–2 page reflection** linking the week's readings to a current event.
- *Presentation Days*: Attendance is required. If you must miss, you must **arrange to present early or provide a pre-recorded presentation**.

ATTRIBUTION POLICY

All submitted work must reflect your own original thinking and properly attribute the sources you engage. Students are expected to trace claims to primary or credible sources, cite them accurately, and critically analyze rather than merely reproduce the material. Proper attribution includes acknowledging ideas, texts, data, images, media, and collaborative contributions.

Failure to attribute sources, misrepresentation, or plagiarism will result in grade penalties and may trigger formal academic integrity proceedings in line with Pratt Institute's Academic Integrity Code.

OTHER PRATT POLICIES

Students are also subject to Pratt's Institute-wide policies, including:

- **Academic Integrity Code**
- **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**
- **Title IX, Anti-Discrimination, and Anti-Harassment**

Full policy details are available on [the Pratt Institute website](#).

SEMESTER OUTLINE

SECTION I: INFORMATION AS A RIGHT

Date	Topic & Lecture Notes	Assignment
Aug 26	Introduction Syllabus, student introductions, in-class reading & discussion.	Readings: • <i>United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i> • <i>Black Panther Party, Ten-Point Program</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Sept 02	Ethics & Philosophy Moral, philosophical, and aesthetic foundations.	Readings: • <i>Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics"</i> • <i>bell hooks, "Engaged Pedagogy," Ch. 1</i> • <i>Helen Nissenbaum, "Privacy as Contextual Integrity"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Sept 09	Law & Policy Public law and corporate rules; legislative trends, court battles, and national security carve-outs.	Readings: • <i>Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy"</i> • <i>Julie Cohen, "What Privacy Is For"</i> • <i>Brennan Center for Justice, "Applying the Supreme Court's Carpenter Decision to New Technologies"</i> • Optional: <i>Daniel Solove, "Murky Consent: An Approach to the Fictions of Consent in Privacy Law"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Sept 16	Governance & Participation Institutions, activism, and Indigenous practices. <i>Student presentations.</i>	Readings: • <i>Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation"</i> • <i>Donella Meadows, "Leverage Points"</i> • <i>Elinor Ostrom, "8 Rules for Managing the Commons"</i> • <i>Jonathan van Geuns & Ana Brandusescu, "Shifting Power Through Data Governance"</i> • <i>Tamara K. Nopper, "Credit Scoring & the Risk of Inclusion"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling, Section 1 Essay + Lightning Presentation

SECTION II: INFORMATION AS A HARM

Date	Topic & Lecture Notes	Assignment
Sept 23	Borders & Movement Border and military information systems that enable surveillance, exclusion, and war crimes. <i>No Class, Independent study; instructor at Border Tech Conference.</i>	Readings & Media: • <i>Al Jazeera, "The Palestine Laboratory" (video)</i> • <i>State of Power, "The Everywhere Border"</i> • <i>Abolish Data Criminalization, "Unmake the Monster"</i> • <i>Joseph Cox, "Flock Removes States From National Lookup Tool After ICE and Abortion Backlash"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Sept 30	Privacy & Self-Determination Surveillance capitalism, digital ID systems, and discriminatory profiling that erode autonomy. <i>Guest speaker: Cynthia Conti-Cook</i>	Readings: • <i>Bart Meuleman, Femke Roosma & Koen Abts, "CARIN Deservingness Principles"</i> • <i>Simone Browne, "Dark Matters", Ch. 2</i> • <i>Citizen Lab, "Citizen Lab Submission to the UN on Digital Birth Registration"</i> • <i>Marianne Díaz Hernández, "Venezuela: Digital ID As a Tool of Oppression"</i> • <i>David Dayen, "The Emerging Danger of Surveillance Pricing"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Oct 07	Labor & Social Welfare Worker exploitation, precarity, predatory pricing of basic needs, and barriers to organizing. <i>Guest speaker: Edward Ongweso, Jr.</i>	Readings: • <i>Human Rights Watch, "The Gig Trap"</i> • <i>Veena Dubal, "The House Always Wins"</i> • <i>Karen Levy, "Surveillance Was Supposed to Make Long-Haul Trucking Safer. Did It?"</i> • <i>Kalia Richardson, "One Year After the Actors' Strike"</i> • <i>Brian Merchant, "The New Luddites Aren't Backing Down"</i> • <i>Optional: John Bellamy Foster and, Robert W. McChesney, "Surveillance Capitalism: Monopoly-Finance Capital, the Military-Industrial Complex, and the Digital Age"</i> • <i>Optional: Meredith Whittaker, "Origin Stories: Plantations, Computers, and Industrial Control"</i> • <i>Optional: Sam Harnett, "Words Matter: How Tech Media Helped Write Gig Companies into Existence"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling

SECTION II: INFORMATION AS A HARM

Oct 14 *No Class, Indigenous Peoples' Day Observed*

Oct 21 **Knowledge & Truth**
Misinformation, filter bubbles, and algorithmic systems that distort access to knowledge.

Readings:

- *Media Matters*, "Right Dominates the Online Media Ecosystems"
- *Whitney Phillips*, "Oxygen of Amplification"
- *Benjamin Kaiser & Jonathan Mayer*, "It's the Algorithm"
- *Emmanuel Maiberg*, "Wikipedia Editors Adopt Speedy Deletion Policy for AI 'Slop' Articles"

Due: Weekly Journaling

Oct 28 **Expression & Speech**
Speech restrictions, censorship, biased platform moderation, and erasure.

Readings:

- *Jack Balkin*, "Speech Is a Triangle"
- *Ethan Zuckerman*, "The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure"
- *Amelia Tait*, "Are TikTok Algorithms Changing How People Talk About Suicide?"
- *Samuel Mayworm, Kendra Albert & Oliver L. Haimson*, "Misgendered During Moderation"
- Optional: *J. Nathan Matias*, "A Toxic Web: What the Victorians Can Teach Us About Online Abuse"

Student presentations.

Due: Weekly Journaling, Section 2 Essays + Lightning Presentations

SECTION III: INFORMATION AS AN ENABLER

Date	Topic & Lecture Notes	Assignment
Nov 04	Transparency & Accountability FOIA requests, whistleblowers, and scrapers that make power answerable.	Readings: • <i>99% Invisible</i>, "Pandemic Tracking and the Future of Data" • <i>Bellingcat</i>, "Masked, Armed and Forceful: Finding Patterns in Los Angeles Immigration Raids" + investigative toolkit • <i>Whistleblower Aid</i>, "DOGE's Unlawful Plundering of Agency Systems" + exhibits
	<i>Guest speaker: Kevin Frick</i>	Due: Weekly Journaling
	<i>FOIL workshop.</i>	

SECTION III: INFORMATION AS AN ENABLER

Nov 11	Storytelling & Archives Memes, art interventions, community data projects, and grassroots archives that shift narratives, resist erasure, and preserve cultural memory. <i>Guest speaker:</i> <i>Sam Hinds</i> <i>Zinemaking workshop.</i>	Readings & Media: • <i>Dimitar Dimitrov, Bishr Bin Ali, Shaden Shaar, Firoj Alam, Fabrizio Silvestri, Hamed Firooz, Preslav Nakov, and Giovanni Da San Martino, "Detecting Propaganda Techniques in Memes"</i> • <i>James Baldwin, "The Creative Process"</i> • <i>Molly Crabapple, "Drawing Blood: The Art of Witness" (video interview on The Laura Flanders Show)</i> • Browse: Mimi Onuoha, <i>"The Library of Missing Datasets"</i> • Browse: Ai Weiwei, <i>"81 Questions / Ai vs AI"</i> • Browse: Center for the Study of Political Graphics, <i>"Poster Collection"</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Nov 18	Obfuscation & Refusal Encryption, burner phones, and data-masking strategies that disrupt surveillance and create space for autonomy. <i>Burner phone workshop.</i>	Readings: • <i>Finn Brunton & Helen Nissenbaum, "Political & Ethical Perspectives on Data Obfuscation"</i> • <i>Kate Rose, "Crypto and Privacy" presentation</i> • <i>Jenny Odell, "How to Do Nothing" presentation</i> Due: Weekly Journaling
Nov 25	Organizing & Commons Unions, coalitions, data trusts, and mutual aid networks that treat knowledge as shared infrastructure and block its weaponization. <i>Student presentations.</i>	Readings: • <i>Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity"</i> • <i>Stephanie Clifford, "The Post-Roe Abortion Underground"</i> • <i>Zeynep Tufekci, "Twitter and Tear Gas"</i> • <i>Marie Claire Bryant, "Underground Railroad Quilt Codes"</i> • Browse: Justseeds, <i>"Graphics"</i> • Browse: Mutual Aid NYC, <i>"Resources"</i> • Browse: ICE SALUTE campaign on Instagram Due: Weekly Journaling, Section 3 Essays + Lightning Presentations

SECTION IV: SYNTHESIS – INFORMATION & HUMAN RIGHTS TODAY

Date	Topic & Lecture Notes	Assignment
Dec 2	Workshop (Remote) Structured peer exchange focused on refining final project ideas through short presentations, targeted feedback, and discussion of scope, format, and argument development. <i>Peer review workshop.</i>	Due: Final Project topic & format to workshop with 3 peers in class.
Dec 9	Final Presentations Student presentations of final projects that analyze information as a right, a harm, and an enabler, showcasing original research, policy analysis, or creative work. <i>Students presentations.</i>	Due: Final Project + Presentations