Jan Cornelis Woudanus, *Leiden University Library* (1610)

T, 17:00-19:45
Social Science 3032

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Every age thinks it’s the modern age, but this one really is.”
- Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*

*Nusquam est qui ubique est* ("To be everywhere is to be nowhere")
- Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, II, 2
We live, we are told, amid an information revolution, in which we have access to, and are bombarded by, more data, more quickly and in more formats, than at any time in human history. These transformations have prompted broad speculation on what the information is doing to human community, the human sense of self, and even the human brain. But in truth while the notion of "information" may be a relatively new one, humankind has repeatedly faced important cultural and technological watersheds that have wrought fundamental (and often jarring) changes in the way that information is generated, shared and stored. In this course we will examine a number of similar "information revolutions" from the past - including the emergence of writing, the invention of the alphabet, the advent of the codex, the early modern paper and print revolution, mass media and literacy, and the digital revolution - with a view to exploring their institutional, cultural and epistemological implications and, in so doing, putting our present predicament in historical perspective.

The focus of this course is on the history of information in western societies, reflecting the interests of the instructor and the available historiography. While history never repeats itself, it is evident that patterns of historical experience recur, including in the realm of information and communication. To some extent, every age of human existence has been an “information age.” Individuals and communities have routinely struggled to accommodate themselves to transformations in modes of information production, storage and transmission. As is the case today, such episodes have witnessed a complicated combination of enthusiastic embrace, halting skepticism, and hostile rejection. An examination of the complex story of information reveals that its history defies inevitability and does not proceed according to any set teleology. Humankind’s historical interface with information is subject to the same contingencies and interface of dependent variables that all other history is – it is important to remember this when we are told that technology and informational change are all about “progress.” In this course we will examine changes both in hardware (like the codex or printing press) and in software (like the alphabet and the Internet). While consideration of historical episodes in light of current-day realities is encouraged, we will endeavor to avoid anachronism, taking care not to assess historical personages according to our understandings of information and its use, rather seeking to judge their actions according to their own perceptions of the world around them. There is an especially heavy emphasis in this course on the “information revolution” of early modern Europe, a subject with which the instructor is particularly familiar; we will spend 6 of the semester’s 15 weeks in early modern Europe.

As a graduate seminar, the focus of this course is on shared discussion and reflection on extensive weekly readings. While the course will proceed in a broadly chronological manner, we will be returning to a number of reappearing themes throughout the semester, with a view to achieving an understanding of the past and new perspectives on the present.

**TEXTS**

**Books**
Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know. Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (Yale, ISBN 9780300165395)

**Articles and Book Chapters**
Robert Heilbroner, “Do Machines Make History?” Technology and Culture 8.3 (July 1967), 335-345
Plato, Phaedrus, sections 227-230, 274-278 (D2L)
James O’Donnell, “From the Codex Page to the Homepage,” from Avatars of the Word. From Papyrus to Cyberspace (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 50-70 (D2L)
Johannes Trithemius, In Praise of Scribes (extracts) (D2L)
American Historical Review Forum, “How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?”: Introduction by Anthony Grafton, Exchange between Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns – American Historical Review 107.1 (February 2002), 84-128
Geoffrey Parker, “The Largest Brain in the World” and “Distance: Enemy Number 1?” in The Grand Strategy of Philip II (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 11-75 (D2L)
Selections from the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert (on line at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/)
Brain Cowan, “Inventing the Coffeehouse,” from The Social Life of Coffee (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 79-112. (D2L)
Philip Fradkin, “The Culture of Disasters” from The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 263-288 (D2L)
Stephen Kern, “The Present” from The Culture of Time and Space (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, c2003), 65-88 (D2L)

Films
Cave of Forgotten Dreams (in class)
The Machine That Made Us (in 6 parts, starting with http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUXISiZ3vSo)

REQUIRED WORK

Attendance and Participation (30%). As this course functions as a seminar, its primary purpose is the exchange of ideas and insights between seminarians. It is thus absolutely essential that participants arrive in class having completed the assigned reading and prepared to share their questions, observations and critiques concerning that reading. Each week I will appoint one seminarian as seminar leader. That student will communicate with me ahead of the class meeting about themes and questions for discussion and will share responsibility with me for guiding that week’s discussion.

Attendance is expected. I understand that on some occasions it proves impossible to attend class. If you expect to be absent (or more than just a few minutes late), please let me know. Please try not to miss more than 2 class meetings. Regular attendance is factored into your seminar participation grade. We will have a 15-20 minute break in the middle of each class.

Short writing assignments (20%). From time to time during the course of the semester, I will ask you to provide 4-5 written reflections on some aspect of our reading or discussion, either as formal essays or as commentary to be shared at our DESIRE2LEARN site. I will provide details regarding these assignments as the semester progresses.

Research Project (50%). The chief piece of work for the semester will be an independent, original research project that examines a historical problem or question relating to humankind’s generation,
storage or transmission of information. The subject of your project will be determined in conjunction with the instructor. Of ca. 20 pages in length, this essay must clearly answer a guiding question or make a demonstrable point. It must also be furnished with a full bibliography and footnotes according to Chicago Manual of Style. In keeping with the course’s subject matter, you are invited to include multi-media sources in your research base. Each student will offer a 20-30 minutes presentation of their research in the final seminar meeting. Further details regarding this assignment will be provided early in the semester.

Other considerations regarding required work:

- I do not give extra-credit assignments
- Completion of all the assignments is required in order to pass the course.
- INC is granted only in cases of dire personal and family emergencies. In all cases, the student must be carrying a grade of C or higher at the time of the request.
- Wikipedia, and all other open-source web material, are not acceptable citable sources

DESIRE2LEARN

This course is supported by DESIRE2LEARN (I agree, the name is dreadful), and students should consult the course’s DESIRE2LEARN site regularly. This syllabus is available at the course’s site, as are additional readings (indicated by D2L) and assignment guidelines. Please access the material there and print it out for your own use. I will also post your grades on DESIRE2LEARN, and may occasionally solicit your participation in discussion forums. From time to time, I will post additional materials of interest to the class on the site. I will announce when we do this in class, but please also check the class DESIRE2LEARN site regularly. If you are not familiar with the DESIRE2LEARN course management program, please spend some time getting to know it.

DESIRE2LEARN may be accessed at http://d2l.kennesaw.edu/

CLASS, ASSIGNMENT AND READING SCHEDULE

Please note: this schedule is subject to change, at the instructor’s discretion. Students are responsible for keeping abreast of announced changes in the class and assignment schedule. Instantly accessible on-line readings have clickable hot links. Most of the journal articles are accessible through databases to which the university subscribes – these are indicated by DB. Readings posted on DESIRE2LEARN are indicated by D2L.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Assigned Work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 15</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Scenes from Cave of Forgotten Dreams (in class)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 22</td>
<td>The World Before Writing</td>
<td>Hobart &amp; Schiffman, Information Ages, 1-31; Plato, Phaedrus (D2L); Marshak, “The Art and Symbols of Ice-Age Man” (D2L); Heilbroner, “Do Machines Make History?” (DB)</td>
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<td>Jan 29</td>
<td>Software Upgrade: the First Writing Systems</td>
<td>Information Ages, 32-84; Gnanadesikan, The Writing Revolution, 1-55, 143-168, 229-248</td>
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<td>Feb 5</td>
<td>Bring on the Book: the Codex</td>
<td>O’Donnell, “From the Codex Page to the Homepage” (D2L); Roberts, “The Codex” (D2L)</td>
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<td>Feb 12</td>
<td>A Medieval Information Age</td>
<td>Clanacht, From Memory to Written Word</td>
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<td>Feb 19</td>
<td>The Advent of Print</td>
<td>Eisenstein, The Printing Revolution, Introduction &amp; 1-120; Trithemius, In Praise of Scribes (D2L)</td>
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<td>Feb 26</td>
<td>The Impact of Print</td>
<td>The Printing Revolution, 123-358; watch The Machine That Made Us (in 6 parts, starting with part 1 @ <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUX1St3vSo">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUX1St3vSo</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar 5</td>
<td>No class</td>
<td>Spring Break</td>
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Mar 19 | Information Overload I | *The Writing Revolution*, 249-272; *Information Ages*, 87-111; Parker, “The Largest Brain in the World” and “Distance: Enemy Number 1?” (D2L)
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Mar 26 | Information Overload II | Blair, *Too Much to Know*
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Apr 2 | Organizing Information from Descartes to Diderot | *Information Ages*, 112-172; Brain Cowan, “Inventing the Coffeehouse” (D2L); selections from the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/)
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Apr 9 | The Emergence of Simultaneity | Winchester, “A League from the Last of the Sun” (D2L); Kern, “The Present” (D2L); Fradkin, “The Culture of Disasters” (D2L)
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Apr 16 | 20th-Century Information Networks | Wu, *The Master Switch*
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Apr 30 | Research Presentations | 
May 7 | Research Projects due in my office | 

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES IN CLASS**

Tape recording of class sessions is permitted. Please turn off all mobile phone and beepers in class. If these devices are needed for emergency use, please let the instructor know before class and set them to silent or pulse. Please never text during our seminars. You may use laptop computers during class time – I am asking you to read a number of works in pdf format – but please confine their use to academic purposes. It is my goal to maintain a collegial, scholarly and relaxed class environment – let’s not let information technology get in the way of that goal.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Research has indicated that over half of university students engage in some form of cheating and that most of these are repeat offenders. While I assume the best of all students, I am also aware of these realities and enforce a no-tolerance policy toward plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. Details concerning KSU’s definitions of academic honesty can be found at the SCAI website: https://web.kennesaw.edu/scai/content/ksu-student-code-conduct#2

The following language is extracted from the KSU Graduate Catalog, and will be applied in this course:

**Academic Misconduct**

Academic misconduct is defined in Section II of the Kennesaw State University Student Code of Conduct. Procedures for addressing and reporting incidents of academic misconduct can be found on the SCAI website at https://web.kennesaw.edu/scai/content/scai-misconduct-procedures. The University’s policies include procedures for both handling informal resolutions of academic misconduct, and filing formal charges with the Student Conduct and Academic Integrity (SCAI) Department that will result in a hearing.

In either situation, whether the matter is handled informally or forwarded to the SCAI for handling, the faculty member should document the incident on an Academic Misconduct Incident Report form, and forward this information to the university SCAI Department.
Incident reports which are submitted to the SCAI will be kept confidential in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Under the informal procedure, a faculty member who has evidence that a student has committed academic misconduct may elect to resolve the issue within the confines of the class, if the student readily admits to the misconduct, without coercion or intimidation. The faculty member must first meet with the student to explain and discuss the allegations of misconduct. If the student admits the misconduct, and declines an SCAI hearing, the faculty member may assign an appropriate sanction. Informal sanctions may include additional academic work for the class, grade reduction, a grade of “F” on the assignment or in the course, etc.

However, if the student denies the misconduct, or the student and faculty member cannot reach an informal agreement regarding an appropriate penalty, the misconduct should be reported to the SCAI for a hearing. Academic misconduct, as determined by an SCAI hearing, carries a mandatory minimum suspension of one semester, unless substantial mitigating circumstances are proven.

I take instances of plagiarism very seriously. If I have questions about the integrity of your work, I will ask to meet with you. If outstanding questions remain, I will adhere to the policies above. Please note: the penalty for cheating and/or plagiarism in this course is a failing grade for the semester. I will report all incidents of plagiarism to the Office of Student Affairs, and the incident will become part of your official record.

The “Mill”, part of Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine (1833)