We are often told that we are living in an “Information Age,” and indeed, this is a truth that seems self-evident: communications and information technologies increasingly pervade our homes, our workplaces, our schools, even our own bodies. But what exactly do we mean when we talk about the “Information Age”? If we are living in an Information Age, when did it begin? What developments — social, economic, political, or technological — made it possible? How does it differ from earlier eras? And finally, and most significantly: what does it all mean?

This course will explore the ways in Western, industrialized societies, over the course of the previous two centuries, came to see information as a crucial commercial, scientific, organizational, political, and commercial asset. Although at the center of our story will be the development of new information technologies — from printing press to telephone to computer to Internet — our focus will not be on machines, but on people, and on the ways in which average individuals contributed to, made sense of, and come to terms with, the many social, technological, and political developments that have shaped the contours of our modern Information Society. Our goal is to use these historical perspectives to inform our discussions about issues of contemporary concern about information technology.
STSC 160: The Information Age

Professor Nathan L. Ensmenger
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Course Format:
The Information Age course meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12-1:30 in the Stitler Hall B6 auditorium. To the degree possible with such a large course, our meetings will be a mixed lecture-discussion format. Our Tuesday session will typically introduce our week’s topic; Thursday will provide further development, as well as an opportunity to talk about the readings and answer any questions that you might have. You should have prepared the readings in advance for the Thursday session.

Attendance in the course is more than usually mandatory. Since there is no textbook for the course, it is absolutely essential that you attend the lectures. I make extensive use of images, audio, and video. Although I will make some of this material available on the course Blackboard site, much of it will be available only during class. If you do need to miss class please let me or one of the TAs know in advance.

Grading in this class will be based on four major components: four short response papers (20%), a longer primary-source research paper (30%), an in-class mid-term (25%), and a final exam (25%).

Required Readings:
All of the readings for this course will be made available electronically via the course Blackboard site or will be distributed in-class.

NOTE: For the Class of 2009 and earlier, this class fulfills the General Requirement for History & Tradition; For the Class of 2010 and later, it fulfills the General Requirement in the Humanities and Social Sciences
Course Schedule:

I Introduction
   September 10: Information, Data, Knowledge
   No readings this week.

II The Age of Information
   September 15: Gutenberg, Galileo, Google
   September 17: Books, Coffee, Revolution

III Annihilation of Time & Space
   September 22: The Politics of the Post-Office
   September 24: What Hath God Wrought?
   Henkin, David. “Embracing Opportunities: The Construction of the Personal Letter,” The Postal Age The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America (2007)

IV Industrializing Information
   September 29: When Computers Were Human
   October 1: Information Factories

   Short response paper #1 due.

V When Information IS Power
   October 6: Advertising the American Dream
   October 8: Ministry of Truth and Information

VI Information Wants To Be Free?
   October 13: Film, Music, and Intellectual Property
   October 15: Mid-Term #1
   In-class mid-term: covers weeks 1–6. Approximately 45 minutes.
VII  War. What is it good for?
    October 20: Giant Brains; or, Machines that Think
    October 22: Build your own Computer!

Short response paper #2 due.

VIII  The Computerization of Society
    October 27: IBM and the Seven Dwarves
    October 29: Software Revolution

IX  Silicon Valley 1.0
    November 3: The Valley of Heart's Delight
    November 5: Go West Young Man

X  Computers, Codes, DNA
    November 10: Mechanical Brains to Molecular Biology
    November 12: Simulations, Simulacra, and the Matrix

Short response paper #3 due.

XI  From Hippies to Hackers
    November 17: Triumph of the Nerds
    November 19: From Videotext to Videogames
Buckingham, David. “Studying computer games” in Diane Carr et al., Computer games: Text, narrative and play (Polity, 2006)

Now Showing: Triumph of the Nerds Documentary
XII  The PC Revolution

November 24: Great Myths in the History of Computing

Artifact Assignment: Primary source readings: radio, personal computer, or advertising.

XIII  Cyberspace(s)

December 1: Origins of the Internet
December 3: Code is Law
Abbate, Janet. Inventing the Internet (MIT Press 1999), Chapters 1-2.

XIV  Red Pill, Blue Pill . . .

December 8: The Future of the Internet
December 10: The Information Revolution Revisited

Short response paper #4 due.

The final exam for this course is currently scheduled for Tuesday, December 22, from 12-2 PM. Please note that the registrar sets the exam schedule, and they are subject to change.