Introducing Knowledge and Information in Society

Andrew Clement & Adam Fiser

In Fall 2009 the Faculty of Information welcomed the first cohort of students into its new Master of Information program. The Faculty greeted these students by plunging them into three huge ‘core’ courses designed to provide a common, integrative foundation in information studies that would serve them well in subsequent courses, regardless of specialization. We, Andrew and Adam, were the instructors for one of these core courses – INF1001 - Knowledge and Information in Society. With a curricular scope as wide as the backgrounds and aspirations of our students, we explored with them an array of contemporary information policy issues relating to information infrastructure development and use. These issues included: copyright; intellectual property; governance; media democracy; digital divides; surveillance; privacy; identity; access to information; intellectual freedom; and professional ethics. Most of these issues are long-standing, and in the case of intellectual freedom even ancient, but they all remain sites of lively debate, with resolutions at best temporary, and perpetually subject to re-opening with each shift in social or technological alignment. In addition to lectures on these subjects, a regular feature of the course was the weekly seminar debates that invited students to argue for or against specific controversial claims related to these policy issues. We were gratified by the many stimulating and insightful exchanges these debates engendered.

The final writing assignment in the course capitalized on this policy controversy theme by calling on students to stake out a position on an issue of their choice and to engage intellectually with competing views. This produced a great many fine papers across the gamut of issues, with privacy and surveillance among the most popular. With the help of our TAs, PhD candidates Karen Smith and Steve Szigeti, we chose five of the finest submissions for inclusion in this issue of Faculty of Information Quarterly.

These papers represent the range of backgrounds and interests of the class as well as the current state of debates on topics ranging across music sampling, the USA PATRIOT Act, iPhones, welfare recipients, youthful appropriations of social networking and much more. You very well may disagree with the claims made here, but we do hope you find the authors’ views stimulating and helpful in developing your own positions on the issues at stake.
Shelley Archibald came to the MI program with a Masters degree in Religion and Culture. Her interests in online behaviour, identity, and privacy led her to her present article, *Panopticon or Participatory Surveillance: An Investigation into Teens Online*. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, Archibald contrasts the privacy concerns of parents and educators with the open youth cultures that have emerged on Social Networking Sites such as Facebook. Archibald’s article challenges parents, guardians and legislators to seriously consider how youth disclose personal information as a form of currency or social capital within their online social networks. She concludes that there are positive benefits to youths’ appropriations of social networking, which appear to inform new cultural trajectories for the concepts of privacy and identity.

Emily Vella has a background in English Literature and a scholarly interest in creative writing that have led her to consider issues of copyright in the creative process. In her article, *The Grey Area: Should Sampling in Rap, Hip-Hop and Mash-up be Considered Fair Use?*, Vella explores current legal and ideological trends in music sampling. Building her analysis around the landmark case of *Bridgeport Music, Inc. v. Dimension Films* 410 F.3d 792, Vella examines the culture and influence of mash-up artists and the role that sampling plays in musical innovation. Along the way she discusses the postmodern aesthetic in contemporary art, and draws upon the work of Internet scholar Lawrence Lessig, to argue that the current state of U.S. law regarding sampling has become unreasonable and stifling of creativity.

With an MA in Social and Political Thought, Janina Mueller now applies her background in Human Rights, Philosophy and Political Science to the study of information technologies at the MI program. In her article, *Surveillance in Ontario’s Welfare Policies and its Broader Implications of Discrimination and Surveillance*, Mueller examines the purposes of surveillance systems, particularly with respect to Ontario’s current welfare policies. Drawing on the critical perspectives of Lyon, Gandy, and Solove, and on the empirical work of Little, Mueller concludes that the surveillance practices in place to enforce anti-fraud measures in Ontario’s welfare system significantly discriminate against vulnerable and marginalized social groups. Mueller warns that discrimination not only occurs as part of the assessment and processing of client information, but exists also prior to data collection as an inherent bias of social sorting.

Grant Patten holds a bachelor's degree from Ryerson University's School of Image Arts where he wrote and directed many short film projects. In his article, *The Sledgehammer and the Nut: Toward an Elegant Proposition for Online Governance*, Patten proposes a form of ‘securely generative governance’ for the internet. Drawing on the works of Zittrain and Duguid, among others, he relates case studies of the Apple iPhone, Net neutrality, and Facebook to explain why internet
governance should carefully, rather than heavy-handedly, impose regulations on users. Patten concludes that, to be securely generative, internet governance must enhance and maintain the internet’s creative pulse without sacrificing the integrity and security of its increasingly complex socio-technical infrastructure.

Peter Gorman recently joined the MI program with a background in English and Contemporary Studies. This academic trajectory has led him to integrate aspects of Archives & Records Management with Book History & Print Culture. In his article, "Any tangible thing": Library records, information privacy, and Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act, Gorman analyzes the USA PATRIOT Act’s impact among librarians, particularly among the membership of the American Library Association. From his assessment of librarians’ concerns and civic actions to date, Gorman concludes that while the ALA has done an admirable job of spreading awareness and galvanizing the issue of information privacy among citizens and media alike, real political change will depend on the US courts. For Gorman, librarians continue to have an important organizing role to play in the challenges to come.