

INF2530H - Special Topics in C&T: AI and Cultural Curation

Winter 2026
Wednesday, 9am-12pm
BA 2159

Instructor

Professor: Gustavo Ferreira
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Office Hours: by appointment
(link on Quercus)



Playing
all the
songs in
the playlist

Playing
the same
5 songs

“Spotify on shuffle.” Reddit Post. R/Musicmemes, May 21, 2024.
https://www.reddit.com/r/musicmemes/comments/1cx1q3u/spotify_on_shuffle/

Acknowledgement of Traditional Land

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Course Description

This course surveys and critically examines the implications of the development and use of Artificial Intelligence technologies, such as machine learning, to the selection, classification, and circulation of cultural products such as recorded music, live music events, film and video, books and audiobooks, and podcasts. Generative AI use for creating cultural products is currently scrutinized for its implications for creative practice, copyright, and aesthetics. Additionally, data collection and algorithmic recommendation are critically examined when applied to news, political content, advertising and user-generated content. However, the critique on the cultural effects of the automated recommendation of creative, cultural and entertainment content is less visible. This course presents theories of cultural value beyond utilitarian and economic grounds and disseminate scholarly production among students on the role of algorithmic media in curating culture. Students will study the critical development of new creative practices, policies, or AI techniques that privilege the value and advancement of cultural content for society.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

Students who have successfully completed this course will be able to:

CLO 1: Interpret theories of cultural value as they relate to media and information organizations and evaluate the political, societal and economic values and discourses driving current AI development and adoption.

CLO 2: Describe the history and practices of information retrieval and recommender systems for cultural products.

CLO 3: Evaluate and compare historical media processes and current AI systems their role in the curation and circulation of cultural content.

CLO 4: Apply concepts learned in the course to research and propose, adversarial creative practices, organization and institutional models, regulations, policies, AI Curation system's design.

Relationship between MI Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

MI Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)	CLO 1 contributes to these PLOs	CLO 2 contributes to these PLOs	CLO 3 contributes to these PLOs	CLO 4 contributes to these PLOs
PLO 1		X		
PLO 2	X			
PLO 3				X
PLO 5			X	
PLO 6				X

Assessments

The assessments in this course are focused on understanding the student's level of achievement in a "curatorial citizenship." This means mastering the fundamental terms and histories of the cultural curation and practices of traditional and digital media, as well as the adversarial research and design or creative production grounded in these concepts.

Assignment Overview			
Category	Assignment	Due Date	% of final grade
A1 - Reading Facilitation	A1	TBD (Assigned)	10
A2 - Research & Collective Paper	A2.1 - Literature Briefs	25 Feb	20
	A2.2 - Field Work	11 Mar	15
	A2.3 - Analysis	18 Mar	15
	A2.4 - Writing	15 Mar	15
A3 - Research-Creation Project	A3.1 - RC Proposal	18 Mar	10
	A3.2 - Peer Feedback	25 Mar	5
	A3.3 - RC Pitch	1 Apr	10

Assignment Descriptions

More details and rubrics will be available on Quercus. Students are not guaranteed to receive feedback on assessed material before the drop deadline. Check the “Late submission policy” for more details.

A1 - Reading Facilitation

Goals: Articulate interpretations, understandings and evaluations of core course content (CLOs 1, 2 and 3)

Part 1 of the course will have a seminar format, heavy on readings. All students must read all required texts and come prepared to discuss them. Beyond this, students will select one of the required readings to facilitate in class. Depending on enrolment, this will be in groups or individually.

Facilitation entails presenting to the class the central idea of the text, the main arguments and data that support this idea, an evaluation of the methodology, and a position on the text's main contribution to our research and course. This position should invite peer engagement: other opinions, questions and additions. Presentations should last 15 to 20 minutes. Discussions will follow without a set time.

A2 - Research & Collective Paper

Goals: gather original, primarily sourced data about some aspect of AI and Cultural Curation and apply the concepts learned in the course. (CLOs 3 and 4).

The class will work together on a collective Research Paper. We will start with our research proposal, which will define the tasks needed to address our question. These tasks will fall under A2.1, A2.2, and A2.3. Every student will do one component of these tasks. The results of these will lead to A2.4 and A2.5, which will also be broken up among students.

A2.1 - Literature Briefs. The course has a long list of required (listed here) and recommended readings (listed on Quercus). Students will be assigned to coherently summarize them for inclusion in the Background and Theoretical Framework sections of our paper. Each student will be assigned an equitable block of readings to summarize (1000 to 1500 words).

A2.2 - Field Work. The research will involve collecting primary source data. Each student will perform two tasks, each in a different modality of research (document analysis, field observation, platform investigation/intervention, system testing or evaluation, etc.) according to our research proposal. After performing the task, the student will add the data to our project folder.

A2.3 - Analysis. Once we have the data, it's time to analyze it. Depending on enrolment, this will be done individually or in groups. The students will code interviews/observations, simulate algorithm runs, synthesize policies or legislation, evaluate technical features, etc., depending on our research proposal. Students will not be required to employ technical skills they do not have, and that are not part of the course's purview.

A2.4 - Writing. After the analysis, students will be assigned sections, or subsections of the paper to write (700 to 900 words).

A3 - Research-Creation Project

Goals: The application of concepts, histories and data gathered by the students will take the form of a Research-Creation proposal (CLO 4). A research-creation project intends to acquire knowledge through the creation process. Thus, after learning about cultural value and AI Curation, the student will design a creative process to deepen their knowledge of one aspect of their interest. Students will not be required to perform the project; they will remain in the proposal phase.

A3.1 - RC Proposal. Based on simplified SSHRC templates, the student will write a research-creation project.

A3.2 - Peer Feedback. Students will read two peers' proposals and provide feedback on what needs clarification or further development, one suggestion to improve the project, and what needs correcting.

A3.3 - Pitch. After considering peer feedback, students will present a 5 to 10-minute pitch to the class. Students will rank the best ideas based on the course content. This ranking will not affect marking.

Brief Course Schedule

All dates in this schedule are tentative and subject to change. The detailed course schedule is at the end of the syllabus.

Overview		
Week	Topic	Date
Part 1 - The value of culture and the role of Curation		
Week 1	Interpreting Culture, Value and AI	7 Jan
Week 2	What does Culture do?	14 Jan
Week 3	Quantification, Datafication and Financialization of Life	21 Jan
Week 4	Media & Cultural Curation	28 Jan
Week 5	A Framework for Cultural Value	4 Feb
Part 2 - The AI Curation Age and What to do About it		
Week 6	The Culture of Recommender Systems (Techniques and Metrics)	11 Feb
Reading Week		16 to 20 Feb
Week 7	Collective Autoethnography Plan and Discussions	25 Feb
Week 8	Working Together: Field Work Dialogue Part 1 + Brainstorming RC Proposals	4 Mar
Week 9	Working Together: Field Work Dialogue Part 2	11 Mar
Week 10	Working Together: Analysis Dialogue	18 Mar
Week 11	Working Together: Draft Sections	25 Mar
Week 12	Research Creation Pitch	1 Apr

Contact, Assumptions and Conduct

For contact about the course's structure and assessments, students can do so directly during office hours, by email or indirectly through a student representative. To book office hours, we will use an MS Bookings link on Quercus. You can direct other private inquiries by email to me or the TA, and we will try to respond within two business days.

All course updates and official information will be discussed *in class*. Quercus will be updated based on what happens in class. Emergency announcements from Quercus will also be sent to your email.

Basic assumptions

1. You will be in class. Presence, dialogue, and interaction are integral to knowledge production.
2. More than one thing can be true. It depends on the circumstances and details.
3. This is a graduate course. You can search and collect data, find peer-reviewed, appropriate further readings, and have a very good grasp of how academic texts work.
4. While using digital technology is part of our daily lives, this does not mean you know how to use every interface or media language.
5. You have the independence and initiative to seek guidance for your work within (Instructors and classmates) and outside of the course (Library resources, Student Advising, Writing Support, etc.). **This includes office hours.**
6. You may not be familiar with fundamental concepts from various disciplines. This is an interdisciplinary field and an interdisciplinary course. This is expected.
7. You can and should make mistakes. The classroom is the place to do it. The consequence for mistakes is more dialogue and collective learning.
8. You want to break with “common sense” and use your perspective to problematize situations and theories, thereby changing your own and others’ perspectives. This does not mean to be a “contrarian” or “devil’s advocate.”
9. You are willing to experiment with non-digital tools and technologies. Use notebooks, pens, pencils, collages, and other materials.
10. You have and are further developing critical thinking skills: you want to imagine and find out how things ought to be, not just how they currently are.
11. We are working together, not against each other.

Class Conduct

When interacting with others, you should always be attentive to their well-being, use polite and non-aggressive language, justify your positions, and give sources of information. When expressing opinions, always consider how your thoughts align with various realities and perspectives.

We value **solidarity as a learning practice**: think and take your positions from a solidary position. You can do this by acknowledging how your context both affects and is affected by others, and how everyone, including instructors and classmates, shares common goals and interests. Your actions should be focused on these common goals. Be open to help and be helped.

Charitable, Critical and Hate-Readings

The choice of topics and readings is based on what I judge to be the most effective to achieve our CLOs, regardless of their controversy or widely recognized or lesser-known problematic elements. Required readings are not merely supplementary content, but a significant part of the topic. **You must read them!**

Here's a good guide on academic reading by Paul Edwards:
<http://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf>

Your reading should always be **charitable**: assume (author and instructor) honesty, and seek their best (if flawed) argument, not its worst, to argue against.

In cases where there are controversies about authors, content, or their use of particular terms, we should always consider their context, limitations, and contributions while also questioning their effectiveness in achieving our goals. However, we should not ignore or dismiss the text without engaging with it constructively. This is a **critical** reading process. Even when assuming honesty, keep imagining alternatives to what they say.

You are allowed one “**hate-reading**” during the semester (in writing or discussion), in case you just can't stand the author or their arguments. But you should direct your rage wisely. Once you use it, it's gone.

Formatting, Citation and Reference Styles

Whenever you submit a text-based document, it must be formatted according to basic academic writing elements. You should use a serif font (such as Times New Roman), size 12pt, double-space and 2.54 cm (1 inch) margins in a letter-sized page.

The university offers MS Word for writing. There are open-source options, such as LibreOffice and LaTeX, or note-taking markdown apps like Obsidian and Bear, which can export PDFs with these basic formatting elements.

For citations and reference styles, I *strongly* recommend using the *Chicago-style author-date* format. You can find more information and writing references in the [Chicago Manual of Style Online](#). This style does not suppress the full author's name, helping with identification. However, you can choose from widely used styles such as APA, MLA.

I recommend using Zotero to manage, track, and generate your sources, citations, and reference lists.

Late Submission Policy

Two types of activities generate assessment in this course: In-class and out-of-class.

In-class activities

These are the ones made in the presence of the instructors and classmates during official class time. This type includes activities you do in part out of class, but that need to be finalized in class. They cannot be compensated, except when Accessibility Services grant specific accommodations **in advance**. **If you missed it, it's gone.**

Out-of-class activities

These are writings, reports, recordings, productions and any other type of activities that generate a final deliverable done out of official class time, not necessarily in the presence of the instructors, and to be submitted on Quercus or delivered in person. These have deadlines, which will then be graded and returned with feedback from the deadline up to 3 weeks afterwards.

After the deadline, **you can submit your assignment at any point in the semester until one week after the end of classes without penalty.** However, **late submissions will only be graded and returned to you** when final grades are finalized and submitted to e-marks **at the end of the term (deadline for grade submissions).** This means that **if you do not submit assignments by the deadline, you might not have feedback before the last official day to drop the course.**

I **strongly** advise you to follow the assignment due dates. They are set to reflect our grade submission deadlines and to provide a reasonable time for assessment and feedback. To ensure you receive feedback in a timely manner and your projects progress properly, please submit your assignments on time. All assignments labelled as late by Quercus will fall under this policy. If you miss the deadline by a few hours or one full day, you **may** still receive feedback as if you submitted on time, **but this is not guaranteed.** This is dependent on whether we have time to go back to barely late assignments.

Within the instructor's purview, no additional extensions or penalties will be accepted for any reason. Please, do not ask.

I encourage you to read about Accessibility Services by following the link in the Faculty Policies section below, explore other accommodations for your assignments if needed, and then discuss them with me.

Generative AI Policy

Due to the nature of this course's content and assignments, the use of generative artificial intelligence tools or apps for assignments in this course, including tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Microsoft Copilot and other AI writing or coding assistants, is prohibited.

Detailed Course Schedule

All dates are tentative and may change.

Each week has specific learning goals that correspond to our CLOs. Additionally, all topics include the following learning goals:

- Identify and rephrase each author's central claim or thesis.
- Summarize their arguments.
- Provide accurate definitions of the key terms the authors use.

Week 1 – Interpreting Culture, Value and AI – 7 Jan

Learning Goals:

Explain the rationale of the course, its routines, what the expectations are and how to meet them (from the instructors' and students' perspectives). Conceptualize a general idea of Cultural Value and the notion of AI.

In-Class Reading

Crossick, Geoffrey, and Patrycja Kaszynska. 2016. "Executive Summary." In Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture | The AHRC Cultural Value Project, 6–10. Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Week 2 – What does Culture do? – 14 Jan

Learning Goals:

Interpret the concept of culture from the standpoint of its value to human life and practice, particularly how it is used and operates in society.

Required Texts

Yúdice, George. 2003. "Introduction" and "The Expediency of Culture." In The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era, 1–39.

Kaszynska, Patrycja. 2025. "Cultural Value as Meaning-Making." Cultural Trends 34 (4): 463–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2381767>.

Facilitated Text

Frey, Mattias. 2021. "1 Why We Need Film and Series Suggestions." In Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste, 23–37. University of California Press.
<https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1525/9780520382022-003/html>.

Week 3 – Quantification, Datafication and Financialization of Life – 21 Jan

Learning Goals:

Evaluate the effects and theories of financialization and quantification on culture.

Required Texts

Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. 2019. "The Coloniality of Data Relations." In *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism. Culture and Economic Life*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503609754>.

Arvidsson, Adam. 2016. "Facebook and Finance: On the Social Logic of the Derivative." *Theory, Culture & Society* 33 (6): 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416658104>.

Facilitated Text

Eriksson, Maria, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau. 2019. "What Is the Value of Free?" In *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10932.001.0001>.

Week 4 – Media & Cultural Curation – 28 Jan

Learning Goals

Explain the roles of media in cultural curation and the implications of this role in how we cultural products represent cultural identities.

Required Texts

Born, Georgina, Jeremy Morris, Fernando Diaz, and Ashton Anderson. 2021. "Artificial Intelligence, Music Recommendation, and the Curation of Culture." Schwartz Reisman Institute for Technology and Society, CIFAR, University of Toronto, June 1.

Saha, Anamik. 2018. "Enabling Race-Making in the Cultural Industries." In *Race and the Cultural Industries*. Newark: Polity Press.

Facilitated Text

Hesmondhalgh, David. 2019. "1 Change and Continuity, Power and Creativity." In *The Cultural Industries*, Fourth edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Week 5 – A Framework for Cultural Value – 4 Feb

Learning Goals

Interpret notions of cultural value and relate them to cultural curation to develop a framework to guide, refuse or disrupt AI cultural curation.

Required Texts

Crossick, Geoffrey, and Patrycja Kaszynska. 2016. "Chapter 3: The Reflective Individual." In *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture | The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, 42–57. Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Facilitated Text

Belfiore, Eleonora. 2020. "Whose Cultural Value? Representation, Power and Creative Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26 (3): 383–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713>.

Week 6 – The Culture of Recommenders (Techniques and Metrics) – 11 Feb

Learning Goals

Describe processes of digital information retrieval and recommendation, and compare and evaluate them with traditional media's cultural curation processes.

Required Texts

Seaver, Nick. 2022. "Hearing and Counting." In *Computing Taste: Algorithms and the Makers of Music Recommendation*. University of Chicago Press.

Ricci, Francesco, Lior Rokach, and Bracha Shapira. 2022. "Recommender Systems: Techniques, Applications, and Challenges." In *Recommender Systems Handbook*, edited by Francesco Ricci, Lior Rokach, and Bracha Shapira, 1–35. New York, NY: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-0716-2197-4_1.

Facilitated Text

Gunawardana, Asela, Guy Shani, and Sivan Yogev. 2022. "Evaluating Recommender Systems." In *Recommender Systems Handbook*, edited by Francesco Ricci, Lior Rokach, and Bracha Shapira, 547–601. New York, NY: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-0716-2197-4_15.

READING WEEK – NO CLASSES – 16 to 20 Feb

Let's curate a playlist together. Send a song that represents a break.

Week 7 - Collective Autoethnography Plan and Discussions – 25 Feb

Learning Goals

Understand basic approaches and plan a collective autoethnographic research project.

Required Texts

Chang, Heewon, Faith Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez. 2016. "Chapter 1. What is Collaborative autoethnography?", "Chapter 2. typology of Collaborative autoethnography" and "Chapter 4. Data Collection." In: *Collaborative Autoethnography*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315432137> Links to an external site.. 17-36; 37-53; 73-94

Facilitated Text

Eriksson, Maria, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau. 2019. "Intervention: Too Much Data" and "Intervention: Introducing Songblocker". In *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*. The MIT Press. 139-147,173-180.

Week 8 - Working Together: Field Work Dialogue Part 1 + Brainstorming RC Proposals – 4 Mar

Learning Goals

Discuss the first week of fieldwork and plan finalization. Briefly discuss RC Proposals.

No Required Texts

Week 9 – Working Together: Field Work Dialogue Part 2 + Prepare for Analysis – 11 Mar

Learning Goals

Describe cultural practices, regulations and other aspects that were investigated in the research. Answer questions about the analysis.

Required Texts

Chang, Heewon, Faith Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez. 2016. "Chapter 5. Data analysis and interpretation." In: *Collaborative Autoethnography*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315432137> 95-114.

Week 10 – Working Together: Analysis Dialogue – 18 Mar

Learning Goals

Interpret results from research, highlight trends, meanings and practices affected or involved in AI cultural curation.

No Required Texts

Week 11 – Working Together: Draft Sections – 25 Mar

Learning Goals

Evaluate research results, writing productions and cultural value conceptualizations.

No Required Texts

Week 12 – Research-Creation Pitch – 1 Apr

Learning Goals

Apply concepts and experiences learned in the course to the proposal of a research-creation project.

No Required Texts

Faculty policies, resources and more

Students must be familiar with all information related to grading policies, health and wellness, accessibility services and accommodations, academic integrity, student absence and declaring an absence in ACORN, and academic dates and deadlines. This information is common to all undergraduate courses' syllabi and can be found on [Required Common Syllabus Elements Grad Courses 2025-2026](#).

Note

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