

Title: Critical Futures: exploring the place and practice of critical informatics training in iSchools

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Abstract

In a world rife with ongoing crises, faculty, researchers, students, and staff within iSchools are motivated to access broader and more critical perspectives addressing information system design, development, deployment, governance, and use. This virtual interaction session will focus on building a network of critical informatics scholars and supporting critical informatics in iSchools. Recent critical informatics scholarship offers methods and theories that situate information systems within social, cultural, economic, and political power structures. These perspectives have explored sites ranging from supply chains for mobile phones to emergent ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence. This Virtual Interactive Session (VIS) will focus on producing and sharing resources to help participants build pathways for critical informatics scholarship, curricula, and program development in our respective iSchools, through roundtable discussion, breakout groups, resource sharing, and collaboration on proposals for research, curricula, and program design.

Description

Purpose and Intended Audience

Faculty, staff, researchers, and students within iSchools see the unfurling crises in the contemporary world and want to do their part to build more just technologies, protect and uplift community memory, build critical information literacies, and collaborate with local and global communities. In this VIS, we wish to create a space for PhD students, early career, and tenured researchers, and program administrators employed at iSchools to discuss the place of critical informatics training in the formation of information professionals and propose pathways to support this work within iSchools.

As early as (2005), Vaidyanathan discussed “Critical Information Studies” as an approach that considers how culture and information are regulated, and the relationships between this regulation and a wide range of human affairs. This necessarily stretches to a vast array of scholarly subjects, employs multiple methodologies, and is relevant not just to practitioners but to anyone touched by information technology. Critical informatics perspectives, per Sweeney & Brock (2014) share an empirical orientation with social informatics (Day, 2007; Kling et al., 1998), a paradigm developed to investigate technical and organizational aspects of information systems, to focus more rigorously on these information systems as situated within cultural, economic, and political power structures.

Recent critical informatics scholarship has tracked how power converges in *information* domains, including work around transnational mining and production assemblages contributing to mobile technology (Noble, 2016), the unequal deployment of technology in educational settings (Crooks, 2018), the problems and promise of using data for social justice activism (Currie et al., 2016), how to draw from different ethical frames to dismantle harmful technologies (Hoffmann, 2019), as well as strategies for incorporating these critical analyses into iSchool instruction (Cifor et al., 2016), among many others.

Proposed Activities

This VIS will be a Zoom roundtable discussion focused on producing actionable guidance on supporting critical informatics scholarship, curricula, and program development in our respective iSchools. In two consecutive 90-minute sessions, three speakers will orient us to the problems we hope to solve, before all participants come together to collaboratively brainstorm areas of intervention, and organize materials to support this work. Beyond the discussion and concrete resources that emerge from it, a core outcome is building a cohort of critical informatics scholars.

The event will begin with a 25-minute panel comprised of: 1) an early-career critical informatics practitioner who will describe their research pathway and its fit within their iSchool; 2) an instructor of critical informatics who will outline their approach to developing critical curricula within their iSchool 3) an iSchool administrator who discusses organizational support (e.g., program development, budgeting, retention and promotion) for critical informatics. A 10-minute break will be followed by a 45-minute discussion with participants based on the threads presented in the previous panel. In this discussion, we will come up with some areas of concern where we can intervene. We envision we will create outputs in the priority areas of 1) teaching 2) funding 3) research practice 4) tenure 5) program and curriculum

development, but will allow discussion to dictate priorities. We would then take a short 10-minute break and move into Zoom breakout groups focused on collecting and developing resources in one priority area for 60 minutes. The outputs will include best practices documents, syllabi, bibliographies for comprehensive exams, research evaluation methods, etc. We would then reconvene for the last 30 minutes to share out to the larger group.

The minutes for these hour-long discussion and brainstorming sessions, along with the materials, resources, and outputs will be put into a centralized MediaWiki that will be considered a living document that can change and grow as we take these basic tools back to our home institutions. From this VIS, we will produce a co-authored proceedings publication outlining the challenges and opportunities that exist for developing more coherent critical informatics training in iSchools, as well as draw from the collaborative outputs to posit a longer-term program to overcome the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities.

Relevance to the Conference/Significance to the Field

This session's topic is relevant to students, early-career scholars, and tenured leaders interested in critical theories and methods related to information systems. As information scholars and educators, it is our responsibility to engage with information professionals around how information systems can reflect and maintain systems of structural power and inequality. We hope participants in this VIS will deeply engage with current developments, research, methods and theory in critical informatics, as well as build opportunities to join ongoing discussions in this growing community of practice.

Virtual Technologies

Zoom, MediaWiki

Duration

Two 90-minute panels (180 mins)

References

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