Technology and Social Inclusion

Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel **(2010) by Gary Shteyngart. New York : Random House PS3619 .H79 S87 2010X. Robarts.**

Super Sad follows the love story of middle aged Lenny Abramov and younger Eunice Park. In an America of the not so distant future, the country is at war with Venezuela, the national debt is extreme, and riots ravage New York. Privacy is a word not known anymore. People carry around devices called an äppärät used to live stream their thoughts and conversations and rate their own and others' 'hotness'. It seems that everyone is obsessed with image, has forgotten about books, and only knows how to gather information from the screen. Everyone except Lenny. Although both he and Eunice suffer their insecurities (likely as a result of the toxic environment they live in), Lenny is determined to prove that image is not everything and that being human is what really counts.

The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim. **(2010) by Jonathan Coe. London: Viking PR6053 .O32 T47 2010. Robarts.**

Maxwell Sim feels completely alone and is heading for an emotional breakdown. His wife of 14 years has left with their daughter, and despite having 70 Facebook friends, Max feels he has no one to turn to. As a result, Max quits his job and takes a new one delivering toothbrushes to the remote Shetland Islands in northern Scotland. On his journey, Max seeks companionship (and finds it in his GPS system he names Emma), runs into an old love, and discovers details of his marriage by befriending his ex-wife online with a secret identity. Coe's writing is comical and engaging; it demonstrates how technology and social media can lead people to be ostensibly connected while truly socially isolated.

Technology vs. Humanism

You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto **(2010) by Jason Lanier. New York: Knopf Publishers. HM851 .L358 2011X. Robarts. Multiple Locations**

A work of non-fiction, this book is an engaging read filled with thought-provoking questions. Lanier, a computer scientist and virtual reality expert, believes that the design of the web has and will drastically influence human life. The design focus of the web has spawned a collectivist mentality and quashed the individual voice. According to him, *Wikipedia* promotes the collective voice (rather than the individual one) as a preferred medium for channeling the truth. Lanier does not believe in this 'hive mind'. He further argues that the web design of the past has become 'locked-in' and therefore it is necessary that designers be more responsible and consider human relationships with technology and their consequences before design is implemented. Controversial and debatable, *You Are Not a Gadget* is sure to stir some questions, whether you agree with Lanier or not

The Truman Show **(1998) film by Paramount Pictures VideoDVD 751500. Media Commons.**

Imagine finding out one day your whole life has been a television show. Well that is the case for Truman! Even before his birth Truman (Jim Carrey) is a television star. Fans watch 24/7 as Truman grows and lives in his perfect world. But when strange things begin to happen (like a spotlight falling from the sky) Truman begins to question the world around him. What do Truman's artificial world and the fictitious environment of constant surveillance and information restriction tell us about the life we lead in our monitored society? Does technology impede our ability to be human? Does Google know what's best for us? Does it make our life easier?

Suggested Reading for INF 2181 Information Policy, Regulation and Law

Mass surveillance, privacy and security, and public access to information technology are all hot topics for today's information professional policy and law makers. To help students gain a further understanding of these issues, explore the social and cultural ramifications of policy making through the following suggested novels and films set in the present day or a dystopian, not-too-distant future.

Created by Katie Southon
University of Toronto
© 2012

Privacy and Technology

Surveillance: a novel (2006) by Johnathan Raban. London: Picador. PR6068 .A2 S87 2006. Robarts.

Set in post 9/11 Seattle, Raban's novel artfully explores the themes of deception, distrust, and illusions, using the story of journalist Lucy Bengstrom's search for truth at the time of terror. Lucy is assigned to write a profile of bestselling author August Vanagus. However, after meeting with him, Lucy begins to question the validity of his memoir about his childhood during World War II. How do we separate fact from fiction? Raban examines the social culture that has arisen with the War on Terror: a culture where "[e]verybody's trying to spy on everybody else" and where youth are used to having their lives watched and documented. Through the differing opinions and discussions of characters, Raban provides the reader with insight into the varying societal standpoints on privacy and security.

King of the Badgers (2011) by Philip Hensher. London: Fourth Estate. PR6058 .E67135 K56 2011. Robarts.

In the small quaint fictional town of Hanmouth set in Southwest England, villagers live in peace amid the safety of closed-circuit security cameras. When an eight-year-old girl named China disappears from the outskirts of town, that peace and safety are disturbed. How did the cameras not record her abductor and where did China go? In the search for China, Hensher studies the nature of privacy: what people try to maintain secret, how appearances can be misconstrued, and what the consequences of privacy violation are. Hensher takes the reader into the homes of his characters and lets the reader unravel their secrets.

The Unbinding (2007) by Walter Kirn. New York: Anchor Books. PS3561 .I746 U53 2007X. Robarts.

First published as a serial novel for the online magazine *Slate,* the novel includes hyperlinks to *Wikipedia*, Youtube and other web based resources to complement the story. While this works well with the online version, the print version bolds the hyperlinks and includes a list of websites, which creates a somewhat choppy reading experience. Nevertheless, the story is intriguing. Kent Selkirk is an operator at a surveillance company, which tracks its users' movements, vital signs, and locations and responds to distress. In one instance, Kent is able to stop an abduction. While this service may be helpful, when Kent begins to take advantage of his position and track his neighbor Sabrina, the reader becomes keenly aware of the limited privacy that comes with sophisticated technology. But Sabrina is watching Kent too; the FBI agent is watching them both; and Kent is watching the agent. When does the watching end?

Limiting Knowledge in a Democracy

Little Brother (2008) by Cory Doctorow. New York, NY: Tor Teen. JUV FIC D637L. OSIE

In this young adult novel, Toronto native science fiction author and blogger Cory Doctorow, tells the tale of 17-year-old computer geek Marcus (aka "w1n5t0n") who sets out to bring down the Department of Homeland Security. Having suffered from being in the wrong place at the wrong time and fed up with living in a police state, Marcus recruits other youth to his mission. Readers will enjoy learning about homemade gadgets to foil security devices and love Marcus' rebellious spirit. Mindful about keeping young people informed, Doctorow includes a bibliography of resources about intellectual freedom, information access, and technology developments.

Nineteen eighty-four (1949) by George Orwell. Oxford : Clarendon Press. PR6029 .R8 N5 1984. Robarts. Multiple Locations.

In this novel, Orwell tells the story of Winston Smith's struggle against the ruling party and its leader known only as 'Big Brother'. The Party watches over and controls all. Everywhere Smith turns he sees television screens with the face of Big Brother. The Party dictates language and history of the people. It prohibits free through, free expression, and even love. There are other people who have the same opposition to the Party as Winston, but contacting them is risky and knowing who to trust is even more dangerous. For the information student, Orwell's exploration of the issues of privacy, information access, and information sharing are intriguing given his work was published in 1949. It is a good reminder to students that the issues, which have been debated for over sixty years, are still relevant today. With some of Orwell's technological predictions becoming reality, these issues require dedicated attention.

Rendition (2008) film by New Line Cinema. VideoDVD 757554 . Media Commons.

On a flight retuning to the United States from South Africa, Anwar El-Ibrahimi (Omar Metwally) is removed from the plane and taken to a detention centre where he is brutally interrogated. His wife (Reese Witherspoon) takes it upon herself to search for her husband, when being told by authorities they have no information to share. The film addresses the issues of privacy, personal safety, and surveillance. What actions should a government be able to take to ensure the safety of its citizens? Should information be shared or withheld? What effect do these actions have on the individuals and families involved?