CS 330 Societal and Ethical Issues in Computing

James Madison University, Fall 2025

Should web site designers be legally required to accommodate blind users? Who has to pay for accidents caused by self-driving cars? Should governments be allowed to purchase user-tracking data? Should posting revenge porn be a crime? Should there be carbon taxes targeted at cryptocurrency exchanges? Computing has changed all facets of our lives, allowing us to maintain interpersonal connections with distant family and friends, adjust our workplace to our individual preferences, and share information that challenges the balance of power with authority figures. Many of these changes create a great benefit for some people while extracting a great cost for others.

In this course, we will use the tools of critical inquiry and ethical frameworks to assess how computing has and will change your life and the lives of people around the world. We will also examine current and proposed laws and policies that shape these effects. After introducing the foundations of computing ethics, we will discuss a range of topics including intellectual property, free expression, security & privacy, and life in an algorithmic society.

Course & Instructor Information

Website:	https://w3.cs.jmu.edu/kirkpams/330/				
Time/Place:	M/W/F 10:20 – 11:10 AM, EnGeo 2208				
Textbooks:	Ethics for the Information Age, 8th edition				
Instructor:	Prof. Michael S. Kirkpatrick	Email:	kirkpams@jmu.edu		
Office:	King 223	Phone:	(540) 568-3371		
Office Hours:	M 4:00 – 5:00, Th 9:00 – 11:30, F 11:30 – 1:00				

Course Structure and Grading Structure

This course is primarily focused on discussing the material during class meetings. As such, there is a heavy emphasis on both pre-class reading and in-class participation. Graded components will consist of the following.

• Attendance and participation - The topics in this class require considering the relative merits of distinct viewpoints. As such, participation is a key element of the class structure. Attendance is required. You are granted up to three unexcused absences; after that, each missed class will result in a reduction in your course grade. Absences beyond these three days will only be excused in special circumstances.

Beyond attendance, additional points will be given based on in-class participation. Class meetings will begin with a warm-up question and include both mini-lectures and a mix of small-group and full-class discussions. The warm-ups and other activities will count toward this grade component.

- Weekly readings and quizzes Each week begins with a pre-class reading assignment and Canvas reading quiz. These reading quizzes are due by Sunday at 5:00 PM. You may take each quiz up to 3 times and your highest score will be used. Your lowest two quiz scores will be automatically dropped.
- <u>Personal values assessment and reflection</u> During the first week of class, you will complete a Canvas quiz asking you to rate your agreement with a number of statements that address many of the topics in this class. After completing the quiz, you will write a short (1-2 page) paper reflecting on your responses and identifying your own key values.
- Module quizzes There will be 4 in-class quizzes intended to assess your understanding of key concepts from the course material. The questions for these quizzes will be based on both the readings and in-class discussions. These questions will be primarily focused foundational concepts, including the relevant laws, policies, and authors' positions.
- <u>Case study</u> Throughout the semester, you will develop a case study on an ethical dilemma in computing. As a part of this process, you will propose a topic and scenario, engage in anonymized peer review, and draft a corresponding policy proposal that incorporates existing legal and ethical frameworks.
- <u>Midterm and final exams</u> There will be both a midterm exam (during normal class time) and a final exam (during finals week). These exams will consist of foundational concept questions (similar to the module quizzes) and short analysis questions that require explaining multiple perspectives.

Component	Weight	Component	Weight
Personal values assessment	5%	Case study	15%
Reading quizzes	20%	Module quizzes	15%
Participation	20%	Exams	25%

Your course grade will be based on the following point distribution:

Adjustments or extensions will be granted based on extraordinary circumstances at the instructor's discretion. If you are sick, please do not come to class; let me know (in advance if possible) so that I can document it for later consideration.

Course & University Policies

• **Classroom inclusion** - Learning environments should be built on mutual respect and support a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, experiences, and identities. Please advise me regarding any concerns or personal circumstances (including your name's proper pronunciation, any name or gender pronouns not reflected on MyMadison, or significant extracurricular commitments) that may be relevant to your full participation in class.

• Free expression and professional demeanor - As computing professionals, we adhere to the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics). In this course, we will be discussing topics that are likely to be uncomfortable and controversial. Maintaining respect and professional communication in discussions is expected.

Note that the ACM Code explicitly forbids discrimination and harassment of all types. If you feel someone is violating these principles (including inappropriate or demeaning jokes), it is your responsibility to take action by informing me or (if you feel comfortable doing so) addressing the individual directly. I will do my best to preserve your confidentiality while addressing the issue.

- Laptop policy This course is structured to use class time for discussions and other in-class activities. You may use a laptop for on-task use only. Do not work on projects or other assignments, for this class or others, during class time. If your laptop use becomes a distraction to your peers or to me, you will no longer be able to use it in class.
- Attendance and grading Participation is a key component of the course and attendance is required as a component of your course grade. If you know that you have specific obligations (such as athletic team commitments or military service) that may constrain your attendance, you will need to talk to me in advance.
- **Communication policy** Communication outside of class will be primarily through office hours and Piazza (available through Canvas). I will direct all questions about course material, due dates, and other logistics to Piazza, which allows me to answer the question once for all students while also giving your peers an opportunity to answer more quickly. Email should only be used for documenting special circumstances, such as regrade requests. I have designated times each day for responding to course communications and I am generally unavailable outside these times.
- Academic integrity Students are expected to comply with the JMU Honor Code as stated in the Student Handbook and available from the Honor Council Web site at http://www.jmu.edu/honor/code.shtml. All quizzes, writings, and exams are to be completed individually and must clearly and honestly represent your own work. Violations of the Honor Code, including plagiarism or cheating, will be referred to the Honor Council.

The use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) is only permitted for the purposes of clarification and assistance. For instance, you may use these tools to suggest an alternate phrasing of your writing or to ask for clarification on a concept or idea. You may not use these tools to generate large pieces of your written work (*no one* wants to read machine-generated prose) and you may not copy and paste any assignment text, reading, or other course material into these systems. If you have questions regarding whether your use is acceptable, you should ask ahead of time.

- Adding/dropping classes You are responsible for registering for classes and for verifying your schedule on MyMadison. Deadlines for adding or dropping classes are available from the JMU Registrar.
- **Cancellations** JMU's cancellation policy (http://www.jmu.edu/JMUpolicy/1309.shtml) provides details regarding inclement weather and other emergencies.
- **Religious observance accommodations** All faculty are required to give reasonable and appropriate accommodations to students requesting them on grounds of religious observation. If you need to request accommodations, you must let me know at least 2 weeks in advance.
- **Disability accomodations** JMU abides by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandate reasonable accommodations be provided for students with documented disabilities. If you have a disability and may require some type of instructional and/or examination accommodations, please contact me early in the semester so that I can provide or facilitate provision of accommodations you may need. If you have not already done so, you will need to register with the Office of Disability Services, the designated office on campus to provide services for students with disabilities. The office is located in Wilson Hall, Room 107 and you may call 540-568-6705 for more information.

Critical inquiry into the social, professional, legal, and ethical concerns of computing and technology. The course will emphasize the application of logical and ethical reasoning, as well as placing topics within the appropriate legal and social context. Topics include history of computing, codes of ethics, security & privacy, political issues, intellectual property, economic issues, professional responsibilities. *Prerequisites: CS 345, WRTC 210, and junior standing*.

Detailed Course Objectives

Following the successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Articulate the need for computer scientists to cultivate ethical reasoning skills.
- Analyze a computing-related ethical dilemma through the lens of common normative ethical frameworks.
- Identify and evaluate technical, ethical, and sociological resources used as evidence in support of debates about computing.
- Summarize key relevant legal concepts and historical developments relating to intellectual property, security, privacy, and speech.
- Express and critique multiple perspectives related to ethical dilemmas in computing.
- Explain the variety of barriers to equal access in computing.
- Identify the benefits and harms of computing.
- Articulate and embody the moral obligations of computing professionals.
- Reflect on and critique the norms and values that are common in the computing profession.