

**QR48 Project Proposal — due Friday, March 20 in lecture or by email to  
qr48@fas.harvard.edu by noon.**

A small project, to be done in pairs, will be due on May 8 at 2pm. This project is likely to be very different from the “term papers” you are used to doing. The paper will be short and the subject matter should be narrow.

The writeup will be only about five pages, but we would like you to do some searching, some reading, some interviewing, *and some thinking* before you start writing. (The writeup should include a list of sources, be they books, articles, web sites, or human beings; that list does not count against the five page limit.)

The subject matter of your project is of your own choice. It should concern some aspect of society, industry, the arts, education, etc., that is being transformed by the information revolution. Ideally your topic would be something that is being done differently today than it was five years ago and will have been further transformed five years from now. **Don’t make the topic too big.** “Basketball” would be too big; “How college recruiting is changing because of the availability of statistical data on high school basketball players” might be about right. “Politics” would be too big, but something about precinct data are used in your home town mayoral elections, or how your local congressperson ran his last election might work. Any of the news stories we have flashed at the beginning of lectures could be the basis for a project. Indeed you may get the most out of taking a single such news story and trying to drill down on what is behind the journalist’s vague words, rather than trying to “cover” some topic.

One of the key components of a project will be evidence that you have talked to people involved in the activity and they have explained to you how it used to be and how it is now. The interviews do not need to be in person, but you should take good notes and record the names and times so you can include that information with your list of sources consulted. You could do some preliminary work on this over spring break.

Your writeup need not be highly mathematical but it should have some quantitative content. How much information is being used? At what daily rate is it coming in or going out? Is it being saved or discarded? Who can see it? Does the public have a right to see the information or is it for sale? Can it go on like this for another 20 or 50 years or will things have to look different downstream? How? Is there some algorithmic discovery that has made the change possible or is it mainly that data are available in digital form?

Perhaps a good way to think about what we want is in terms of a framework like this. It may not fit every project idea perfectly, but it should be a good guide in most cases.

1. How are people using information and communication now?
2. How did they used to do it, before there were computers and databases and rapid communication of digital data?
3. How will this part of the world have changed in five years if the trends continue as they have? (Not only technology trends, but related trends in the world of business, law, etc.)
4. How *should* things be in the future?

Item (4) is important. We want you to take a well-considered moral position. Your generation will have the opportunity to set or thwart many developments and policies relating to information and communication, and we want you to start thinking about your responsibilities now.

For the proposal due March 20, we would like a one-page statement of what you propose to do. If you can identify a partner, good, but if not, we’ll post the unmatched proposals so partnerships can form. In the past better projects have emerged because we introduced individuals who had proposed projects in the same general “space”; their conversations yielded better ideas than either had to begin with. We will read the proposals over spring break and provide feedback. Don’t worry if you come up with a better idea while you are away, or want to team up with someone rather than do what you have proposed — our objective is to have the proposals firmed up by Friday, April 10, leaving you a month on which to work on the project.