

Defending Democracy in a Digital Age, SPP/COMM/CICS 208

Fall 2025

Instructor: Ethan Zuckerman

Email: ethanz@umass.edu (Please note: I rarely check my ezuckerman@umass.edu email!)

Class meetings: Tuesday and Thursday, Integrated Learning Center, room S331, 4 - 5:15pm

Office Hours:

In person - 5:30 - 7pm Tuesday, Thompson Hall, Room 530

There is no need to make appointments for office hours - it's first come, first served and you're encouraged to hang around, meet fellow classmates, hear their questions, etc. There's usually snacks at my office hours and you're strongly encouraged to attend simply so we can get to know each other - you don't need to have a question or problem for us to meet up. Just come by if you have some free time.

I can also make time for a one-on-one in my zoom room - email me to schedule a time.

Zoom room: <https://umass-amherst.zoom.us/my/ethanzuckerman>

TA: Joohee Kim - jooheekim@umass.edu

office hours: TBD

This is a big class with a lot of writing. Our TA Joohee and a grader will be working with me to evaluate your writing assignments. I'll provide them with a rubric to evaluate each assignment and will be checking their work to make sure grading is consistent. This means that I likely will not read everything you write for the class, but also that I will be reading some of what you're writing, particularly if it's really great or if there's a disagreement on how to evaluate it.

Course Description:

After almost 250 years of democracy, the American experiment is looking somewhat fragile: a disputed election and a riot at the nation's capital in 2021 suggest that America's future as a democracy is not guaranteed. Donald Trump has advanced a vision of presidential power that concentrates a great deal of control in the office of the presidency, and experts around the world are asking if America is becoming a competitive autocracy instead of a flawed democracy.

More broadly, democracy is on the decline in many locations around the world, and more people live in autocracies than democracies, reversing a shift towards democracy many thought would be permanent. What's causing these shifts? Could the revolutions in information technology, making information available and allowing many more people to take part in political and civic conversations, be contributing to the declines we are seeing in democracy?

The conventional institutions of a democracy - independent executive, legislative and judicial branches - are complemented by a powerful social institution: the public sphere, a space in which voters learn about contemporary issues and debate possible solutions to civic problems. The public sphere has been part of American democracy since its inception, and is considered a part of open societies around the world. But the public sphere is changing, radically and rapidly, as participatory digital media becomes the dominant form of online interaction.

In this class, we will explore how societies - particularly the US - have governed the public sphere at different points in history. We will examine the emergence of the digital public sphere and the changes it has brought to news, deliberation and opinion formation. Our focus will be contemporary concerns about the digital public sphere - are online dialogs increasing political polarization? Leading citizens to be misinformed? What groups are helped and harmed by changes in the ways the public sphere operates in a digital age?

Given that the public sphere has been subsidized and regulated throughout history, we will consider what steps we, as a society, might take to build a public sphere that strengthens democracy in our digital age. Our final assignment will focus on brainstorming prescriptions - which touch on policy, technology, economic incentives and social norms - that could improve the digital public sphere and our democracy.

Course Objectives:

Students will learn to:

- Understand the complex relationship between citizens, the public sphere and governments now and through the history of democracies
- Make compelling arguments to support a point of view, grounded in texts as well as in personal experiences
- Learn to debate, taking different points of view, learning to make compelling arguments even for points of view we disagree with
- Explain complex concepts in text and audiovisual means
- Propose solutions to complex social problems using policy, economic, social and technical interventions
- Critically evaluate proposed solutions to complex social problems

Course Requirements:

We have only one **required** textbook: [The Creation of the Media by Paul Starr](#)

It's available for as little as \$2 used from a number of online sellers, so don't let that be an obstacle. Please do get a copy, because I am not able to post sections online, and my lectures can only cover a small portion of what Starr covers in this fantastic book.

You're also strongly encouraged to obtain a copy of [Democracy May Not Exist But We'll Miss It When It's Gone by Astra Taylor](#). As with the Starr, it's inexpensive from used shops like BetterWorldBooks online.

Other readings will be available online, and we will scan and put online excerpts from other books.

You are encouraged, but not required, to pay particular attention to news media this semester. All UMass students have a free subscription to the New York Times:
<https://www.nytimes.com/activate-access/edu-access>

If you're more a listener than a reader, I recommend:

The Daily from The New York Times:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-daily/id1200361736>

The Headlines from The New York Times:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-headlines/id1758855019>

On the Media from WNYC:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/on-the-media/id73330715>

What Trump Can Teach Us About Con Law:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/what-trump-can-teach-us-about-con-law/id1242537529>

2025 has been a wild and unpredictable year in terms of US politics. To address topics currently in the news, this syllabus will change in real-time to reflect what's happening. I recommend that you don't read too far ahead, as readings will be added to and disappear from the syllabus as a result.

Assignments:

Four position papers, each 500 words. In this brief paper, take a position on one or another side of a major debate in the history of the public sphere. Position papers must cite sources, preferably sources both from class reading and from your own research - we will discuss citation and other aspects of writing a strong paper during class time. Each position paper represents 40% of your grade (you'll get a grade from 0-10 on the paper.)

Video explainer: With a team of up to three others, make a 90 second Tiktok-style video that explains a core aspect/concept of the public sphere (contemporary or historical) addressed in the course. This is worth 20% of your grade, with some bonuses and penalties. The explainer can be turned in any time after the second week of the semester. However, to prevent everyone from waiting until the last minute, grading favors those bold enough to create videos early in the semester. Turn in the video in September, and you're eligible for up to 25 points; October videos

can score between 0-22 points, November videos between 0-20. If you don't turn in the video until December, 15 points maximum.

Solution memo: 2000 words. Propose an intervention (legislative, technical, economic, cultural or any combination thereof) to address a contemporary problem of the public sphere. 30% of your grade, (graded between 0-30 points)

Participation:

Attendance and participation in class discussions - responding to polls, posting questions to the question tool, participating in discussions and debates - represents 10% of your grade, and will be scored between 0-10 points. If you're not in class, you can't participate fully, so please maximize your time in the classroom. We'll be using a PIN system to log your attendance. You're allowed three absences a semester without consequences, after which I'll start to adjust your grade down.

The best way to ensure your participation in class is noted is to participate in dialogs in class, to answer questions I put to the class and to ask questions. If you're not sure I know your name, I probably don't - please feel free to remind me. If I know who you are and know that you're participating, I promise you'll get full marks on participation.

Course Grade Scale: Your final grade in the course will be based on the following scale:

94-100% A	80-82% B-	67-69% D+
90-93% A-	77-79% C+	60-66% D
87-89% B+	73-76% C	Below 60% F
83-86% B	70-72% C-	

Method of Instruction:

We will be meeting twice a week for 75 minute periods. The first part of our time together - usually 40-50 minutes - will focus on the readings assigned. I will help unpack the readings and talk about how they fit into the larger issues we're exploring. We'll use online polling to get the class's opinion on issues, and ask people to explain the positions they took in polls. We'll also be using an online tool to solicit questions from the class and vote on which ones to discuss. The second section of each class will usually feature work in pairs or groups. Some classes, we'll take sides in debates and sharpen our best arguments... which is especially fun if you've been assigned a point of view you don't agree with. Other times we'll explore and audit tools of contemporary digital life or have brief workshops on research techniques and methods. All classes are recorded using Echo 360, but it's challenging to record the small group work -

please make attending the class a priority so you get full marks for participation and get the full experience of the course.

Course Policies and Guidelines:

Classroom Environment: Students are required to maintain a classroom environment that is respectful and nurturing where everyone can express all parts of themselves without the fear of judgment. Be mindful of each other and try not to make assumptions about your peers or your instructors or their beliefs. At the same time, our project is that of intellectual debate and challenge. I ask you to take on the work of questioning and criticizing ideas, focusing on that aspect of discourse rather than questioning individuals' intentions.

You are invited to let me know, and correct me if I use the wrong name and/or pronouns to refer to you in class. Throughout the course, feel free to email me or make an appointment with me to discuss any conflict that comes up amongst your peers or if you have any feedback regarding the tone and sensitivity with which these topics are being discussed in class.

Land acknowledgement: The University of Massachusetts Amherst was founded and built on the unceded homelands of the Pocumtuc Nation on the land of the Norrwutuck community. This legacy, and broader legacy of American conquest of Native lands is an essential component of the historical narratives we are exploring in this class, and has relevance for the problems we tackle today. Please read [the university's Land Acknowledgement here](#), and reflect on the complexities of a democratic experiment that was inextricably intertwined with the forced removal of the peoples who came before us on our campus.

Absence: Each student is granted three unexcused absences per semester. Beyond these, please meet with me to discuss challenges you are having being physically present in class. Please inform me about any religious holidays or university-sponsored travel (with adequate documentation) conflicts so that we can plan to accommodate your needs in the course. The exception to this is, of course, COVID - if you have reason to believe you've been exposed to COVID or another communicable disease, please let me know so we can be sure you can watch the recording and work through the exercise yourself. Thanks for being responsible to our campus community and keeping us all healthy. Otherwise, all university policies on attendance apply: <https://www.umass.edu/registrar/class-absence-policy>

Deadlines: Deadlines for papers in this class are designed so that we can discuss your ideas in class. If you're late submitting your papers, we don't get the chance to discuss the work you've done, so I ask that your work be as timely as possible. If you won't be able to turn in an assignment on time, please alert both me and Paige so we can work out accommodations.

Disability Services & Class Accommodations: UMass provides academic resources to those who are registered with Disability Services. In order for me to accommodate your needs, you must be registered with Disability Services and communicate that to me. We will work together to ensure your needs are met and the strictest confidentiality is always in place. See [Disability Services](#) for assistance.

Academic Honesty: Violations of academic integrity will be dealt with according to the UMass Academic Integrity Policy:

<https://www.umass.edu/senate/book/academic-regulations-academic-integrity-policy>

Device Use: Obviously, devices like laptops and mobile phones are a mixed blessing in a classroom. On the one hand, they are powerful tools for note taking, research and learning more about ideas raised in class. On the other hand, it's really easy to lose track of a conversation if you're texting with your friends. You're strongly encouraged to use your laptops to take notes either for yourself or as part of a shared document. You're encouraged to use a smartphone to take part in polls in class. You're expected to focus on the course and not on the many other distractions of your devices. You'll work it out. I have faith in you.

Chat GPT, Grammarly, and Generative AI: We will discuss generative AIs like ChatGPT as one of our explorations in the classroom: how it works, what it's capable of and what it's not capable of. You are allowed to use ChatGPT and similar tools in the course of your classwork. However, you must disclose when and how you've used AI. I do not recommend typing a prompt into ChatGPT and turning in the results as your essay - as we will discuss, it's likely that you will get references to works that don't exist... and a major part of the grading rubric involves citation. Good uses for generative AIs include asking for help making a piece of your writing more readable, asking for possible counterarguments to the case you're making, or help putting together a rough first draft of an idea. We will discuss further in class - the hard and fast rule is that, if you use an AI, you need to disclose that you did and how you used it.

Week 1, Class 1 - September 2: Introduction - The Three Ring Circus and the Big Tent

The conventional model of democracy talks about three branches of government - the legislative, executive and judicial. This "three ring circus" model of democracy is an incomplete one - the government and our relationship are surrounded by a media environment that governs how we see and understand the world and how we discuss possible solutions to the problems of the day. It is the big tent that the circus takes place in, and it shapes our civic life in ways we are still figuring out.

At a moment where democracy seems to be in crisis, understanding the relationship between changes in the media environment and changes in democracy is important work to do... and is the work we'll be doing together this semester. We'll talk through some themes and questions that will recur throughout our time together: How do we know what we need to know to participate in a democracy?

On Tuesday, we'll discuss the overall structure of the course, the core ideas and expectations for your participation. We'll experiment with some of the tools we'll be using throughout class this semester, including the debate format and in-class polling.

Week 1, Class 2 - September 4: What's wrong with democracy?

Near the end of the 20th century, it looked like a safe bet that liberal democracy would sweep the world and become the dominant form of government. Now, democracy's future no longer looks so certain, as autocratic, technocratic and nationalist governments gain in popularity. At the same time, media has transformed technologically, unseating the power of newspapers and broadcast media and giving audiences access to a much larger set of speakers on digital platforms. How are the changes in media affecting our understanding of democracy, and vice versa?

Reading for Wednesday, September 4:

Taylor - Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone, introduction.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/13TR2pg0bHmhypmm2abms4o27goxncBhn/view?usp=sharing>

Foa and Mounk:

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html?unlocked_article_code=1.GU4.Wj4U.mhqVWMvTDESv&smid=url-share

Abadi - What if Democracy and Climate Mitigation are Incompatible?

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QVGgtQW6WgB6LTrl18sSxo29rudpoVm/view?usp=sharing>

Optional readings:

Foa and Mounk, The Democratic Disconnect -

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoaMounk-27-3.pdf>

Chris Fleming - The End of History: Francis Fukuyama's controversial idea explained -

<https://theconversation.com/the-end-of-history-francis-fukuyamas-controversial-idea-explained-193225>

Week 2, Class 1: Just How Much Trouble Are We In?, September 9

Some scholars warn that the US is no longer a democracy but is falling into "competitive authoritarianism". Others suggest that we're going through a "stress test" of democratic institutions, but that the basics of democracy still hold in the US. And others argue that the consolidation of executive power under Donald Trump is reforming parts of our democracy that have been dysfunctional or stuck. Is democracy in America in trouble? How would we know?

Reading:

Langfitt, Hundreds of Scholars Say US is Swiftly Heading Towards Authoritarianism,

<https://www.npr.org/2025/04/22/nx-s1-5340753/trump-democracy-authoritarianism-competitive-survey-political-scientist>

Levy. On the Expansion of Executive Power, An Overview:
<https://www.cato.org/blog/expansion-executive-power-overview>

Rogers, Democratic Efficacy and the Unitary Executive:
<https://lawliberty.org/forum/democratic-efficacy-and-the-unitary-executive/>

Applebaum, A Warning from Europe: the Worst is Yet to Come,
<https://www.anneapplebaum.com/2018/10/06/a-warning-from-europe-the-worst-is-yet-to-come/>

Optional:

Levitsky and Way: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism
https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/levitsky/files/SL_elections.pdf

Week 2, Class 2: The Crisis in Journalism. September 11

Whether or not democracy is threatened by actions in the first months of the Trump presidency, there is reason to believe that journalism - particularly local journalism - is in real trouble, due to technological and economic reasons. What will we lose as a society if we don't have reliable information about what's happening in our communities and our nation? What are visions of journalism that might survive in an age of social media and AI?

Reading for Thursday September 11:

Hendrickson - Local Journalism in Crisis -
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/local-journalism-in-crisis-why-america-must-revive-its-local-newsrooms/>

Sterns - How We Know Journalism is Good for Democracy -
<https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy-9125e5c995fb>

Farhi - Is Journalism Headed for an "Extinction-Level Event"?
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1geGpPQm87hPzxKFSxU3B-aCcW_CaPQOj/view?usp=sharing

Filloux - You Can't Sell News for What it Costs to Make -
<https://medium.com/the-walkley-magazine/you-cant-sell-news-for-what-it-costs-to-make-7a4def964ffa>

Reisner - The End of Publishing as We Know It -

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2025/06/generative-ai-pirated-articles-books/683009/>

Position paper, 500 words, plus citations. Due September 21:

Is democracy under threat? From who or what? And is that such a bad thing? (A hint: Picking one major reason why you believe democracy is or is not under threat makes for a much better argument than listing every factor you can think of!)

Week 3 - September 16, 18: What's the public sphere?

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas examined the emergence of coffee shops, private clubs and salons in 17th and 18th century Europe and proposed that in these spaces, the idea of a public, capable of public opinion that could influence a monarch, first emerged. This apparently simple idea has revolutionized how we talk about the relationship between government, society and media. How does Habermas believe the public sphere comes about? Why is it so important? What blind spots does Habermas's vision have, as pointed out by scholars like Nancy Fraser? How do ideas like "counterpublics" explain contemporary phenomena like Black Twitter?

If Habermas's public sphere unfolded in coffee houses, and Fraser's counterpublics in feminist 'zines, where is our contemporary public sphere and what are the forces that control it?

Reading for Tuesday, September 16 (Habermas's Public Sphere):

Required - Habermas: The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)

https://www.jstor.org/stable/487737?origin=crossref#metadata_info_tab_contents

Fraser: Rethinking the Public Sphere

https://carbonfarm.us/amap/fraser_public.pdf

Andre Wheeler: Ten Years of Black Twitter

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/dec/23/ten-years-black-twitter-watchdog>

Optional - Habermas: Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Intro, translator's note, section 3, 4, 5.)

<https://vdoc.pub/download/the-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere-2h30t39s46eg>

Benson: Shaping the Public Sphere

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12108-009-9071-4>

Read intro and "Contributions and Shortcomings of Habermas's Structural Transformation, Log in via UMass to gain access

Reading for Thursday, September 18: (The contemporary public sphere)

Applebaum and Pomerantsev - How to Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YFrhVN55f0Dhtl79RgHqZ9dNTWGe7M6E/view?usp=sharing>

Santhanam - Should Trump be allowed back on social media after he leaves office? Half of Americans say yes

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/half-of-americans-say-trump-should-get-back-his-social-media-megaphone-after-leaving-office>

Douek - The Year that Changed the Internet.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JYCPYtFRL2V282fKGaZ_zZTOotzIZTaW/view?usp=sharing

Week 4 - September 23, 25: The post office and the founding of America

Part of the revolution in which the United States broke away from Great Britain was a set of media revolutions, in which American newspapers and postal mail took on radically different characteristics than their British predecessors. The emergence of these new institutions helped trigger the American revolution, and the unique American combination of plentiful newspapers and cheap mail services may have been the only way for a public sphere to emerge in the new nation.

Is the Internet serving the same function to create a common public across a vast nation? Or are the different ways we can use the internet isolating and separating us from one another? Is fake news a threat now in ways it wasn't in the 18th century? Does the first amendment protect our freedom to express a broad range of points of view? Or do newspapers and platforms have the right to express their points of view?

Reading for Tuesday, September 23:

Starr, Creation of the Media, chapter 2, "New Foundations"

Mansy, The Age Old Problem of Fake News,

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/age-old-problem-fake-news-180968945/>

Reading for Thursday, September 25:

Starr, Creation of the Media, chapter 3, "America's First Information Revolution"

Warzel, Is this the Beginning of the End of the Internet?

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NDH8uCl66lmuo_EGdFPse-Yk6BNu1Ed4/view?usp=sharing

Zuckerman, Is Social Media Like a Newspaper or a Telephone?

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/technology/60241/is-social-media-like-a-newspaper-or-a-telephone-the-answer-has-big-implications>

Felner, Supreme Court protects the future of content moderation.

<https://www.theverge.com/2024/7/1/24166388/supreme-court-ruling-moody-paxton-texas-florida-social-media-law>

Week 5 - September 30, October 2: The Yellow, Red and Black press (Commercial, objective and activist traditions in US Press)

American newspapers underwent a massive shift by the early 1900s, investing heavily in investigative journalism and pioneering neutrality and objectivity, if only as marketing strategies. Few early publishers would have imagined an independent Black press, or that abolitionists would find traction for their arguments in print when they could not make them in person. And even as journalism professionalized and enshrined objectivity, highly critical activist journalism acted as a powerful check to commercial power.

How has the internet opened a space for activists and those with alternative points of view? Are the dangers of giving a platform to extreme points of view outweighed by the benefits of allowing activists to help their movements reach global audiences?

Reading for Tuesday, September 30:

Starr Chapter 4, sections “The Revolution in Cheap Print”, “New Publics, New Markets”

Walker, The Spanish-American War and the Yellow Press:

<https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2024/02/the-spanish-american-war-and-the-yellow-press/>

Reading for Thursday, October 2:

Chapter 6, sections “Diversity and Daily Journalism”, “Politics, Markets and Magazines”, “The Local and Oppositional Press”

LOC exhibit - <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african-american-odyssey/abolition.html>

The Appeal to Reason - <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/appeal-to-reason/>

Prince - Why We Terminated Daily Stormer:

<https://blog.cloudflare.com/why-we-terminated-daily-stormer/>

Johnson - Why CloudFlare Let an Extremist Stronghold Burn:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jz0R9Oq43BQT2qPV7ceW7U3p5gOHLKIC/view?usp=sharing>

Position paper, 500 words, plus citations, due October 12:

What's the single most important change between the media systems described in Starr and our contemporary media? Pick ONE major change and focus your argument around it.

Week 6 - October 7, 9: How the Internet Works and How that Changes Democracy (or doesn't)

As internet technology began to displace earlier forms of media, there was tremendous enthusiasm about what a new public sphere might make possible... and deep anxiety from the newspaper industry and other institutions worried about being displaced. What changes did we imagine and which have actually happened? How have new factors like the rise of the attention economy and surveillance capitalism change the value of the internet as a public sphere?

Reading for Tuesday October 7:

Taylor, Democracy May Not Exist, Chapter 1

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-TIYrx6VNPn33ahpRTlkj3jz78mVKFgw/view?usp=sharing>

Benkler et al, "Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere" - only the Introduction and Networked Public Sphere sections:

<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/economy-crone-benkler-2015b.pdf>

Barlow - Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace -

<https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

Reading for Thursday, October 9

Herbert Simon - Designing Organizations for an Information Rich World -

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201006235931/https://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/warchive?type=file&item=33748>

Zuckerman - The Internet's Original Sin -

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kHJHwEEEmEHZ23VIgBMTbBwcZGGn9GQXy/view?usp=sharing>

Ceglowski - The Internet With a Human Face -

https://idlewords.com/talks/internet_with_a_human_face.htm

Week 7 - October 14, 16: Information disorder

Fake news is not a new phenomenon - nations struggled with the consequences of misinformation as early as the 17th century. But the impacts of misinformation may be much more significant in our fast-paced and decentralized media culture. Are any of the lessons from fighting disinformation in centuries past applicable today?

Reading for Tuesday, October 14:

Marche - How We Solved Fake News the First Time -

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q8AWCu4WxL8YvB3yQZSu2PpTPQLi-73O/view?usp=sharing>

Silverman and Alexander - How Teens in the Balkans are Duping Trump Supporters with Fake News:

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

Wardle and Derakshan - Information Disorder (2017) - Exec Summary and Intro -

<https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

Benkler, "Breitbart-led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda" -

<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>

Reading for Thursday, October 16:

Selection from Wendell Potter, Deadly Spin:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CaJgXrinE6fV0NG5iZAJsnAZmsE5dCcO/view?usp=sharing>

Watch "Don't Be A Sucker":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K6-cEAJZIE>

Position paper, 500 words, plus citations. Due November 2.

Walter Lippmann tells us that our ability to act as democratic citizens depends on what we know about the world. Given what we know now about mis/disinformation, threats to journalistic business models and political polarization, how should news media work today? Who should report the news? How should we consume it? Who should pay for it?

Week 8 - October 21, 23 - How do we interpret a confusing world?

A hundred years ago, Walter Lippmann despaired of our ability to interpret a confusing world, made more so by powerful institutions manipulating media outlets. Our digital public sphere descenders gatekeepers and allows a greater range of voices to speak. How do we navigate this confusing new world?

Reading for Tuesday, October 21:

Lippmann, "Public Opinion" - read chapter 1. If you are feeling ambitious, read 2-8 as well - I will be discussing and summarizing these in class.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DYsIBjsNEVgZbijvMdjio-FbLrkoQHOO/view?usp=sharing>

Schudson, "The public, the media and the limits of democracy: Re-examining the Lippmann-Dewey 'debate'" -

<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/public-media-and-limits-of-democracy-the-lippmann-dewey-debate/11228168>

Reading for Thursday, October 23:

Kovachs and Rosensteil - Read "The Journalist's Theory of Democracy", "The Theory of Interlocking Public" and "The New Challenges" from The Elements of Journalism:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c6D1iMbZqy3VIQZpa4qdNrvmjOo1Cjyv/view?usp=sharing>

Marres - Issues Spark a Public Into Being:

<https://opencuny.org/pnmarchive/files/2019/01/Marres-Issue-Spark-a-Public.pdf>

Week 9 - October 28, 30 - A Common Reality?

The promise from the diversity of digital media is that we can hear voices that previously did not have the chance to be heard. The danger is that we may end up hearing such divergent voices that there's no common reality in which to discuss what we hear.

Reading for Tuesday October 28:

Farrell and Schneier - Democracy's Dilemma -

<https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/forum-henry-farrell-bruce-schneier-democracys-dilemma/>

Kathleen Ann Ruane - Fairness Doctrine: History and Constitutional Issues -

<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R40009.pdf>

Jay Rosen - Audience Atomization Overcome: Why the Internet Weakens the Authority of the Press - <http://archive.pressthink.org/2009/01/12/atomization.html>

Mackinac Center - The Overton Window - <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>

Reading for Thursday, October 30:

Ward, Democrats are Feckless and Republicans are Chaotic. Here's why:

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/05/01/hollow-political-parties-donald-trump-00155297>

Tripodi, The Propagandist's Playbook, Intro and chapter 2

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KKU8znHbf5-0eEAKBm9X9zqbX_i7jiUd/view?usp=sharing

Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics -

<https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>

Week 10 - November 6 - Listening at Scale

It's hard for citizens to know what's going on in the world so they can vote, lobby or protest. But it's at least as hard for representatives to know what their constituents are feeling. Over the years, we've used a variety of technologies - petitions, polling, switchboards, and now AI - to listen at scale. How should representatives listen, and how do we ensure listening is fair?

Reading for Thursday November 6:

Time Magazine - The Black and White Beans -

<https://time.com/archive/6600877/opinion-the-black-white-beans/>

Keeter and Kennedy - Key Things to Know about US Election Polling in 2024 -

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/28/key-things-to-know-about-us-election-polling-in-2024/>

Wegman - The Electoral College Will Destroy America -

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/opinion/electoral-college-trump-biden.html?unlocked_article_code=1.GU4.ie9_e0b0tjnU-VWs&smid=url-share

Excerpt from Eric Gordon, forthcoming

Position paper, 500 words. Due November 23:

Propose a single intervention that addresses at least one of the epistemic problems for democracy Lippmann raises in Public Opinion. Use Dewey, Kovacs/Rosensteil, Lippmann or any of the other thinkers we've read to support the validity of your intervention.

Week 11 - November 13 - Personalization and algorithms

How do we navigate a world in which there's always too much to see and read? If the answer used to be "gatekeepers", the answer now is "algorithms". But how do we know whether what those algorithms are giving us is good for us? Or for society?

Readings for Thursday, November 13:

Excerpt from Negroponte, Being Digital

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/138qVfvVji3EcroTHP1FZK2HEZyRn3BoT/view?usp=sharing>

Excerpt from Sunstein, Republic.com

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aj2VUj2vmkwkqmKwBcHGWai9SePyidpF/view?usp=sharing>

Eli Pariser - Filter Bubbles (TED talk) -

https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en

Herman, "How TikTok is Rewiring the World"

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/style/what-is-tik-tok.html?unlocked_article_code=1.Gk4.zm_c.6Ugk1FERmodh&smid=url-share

Week 12 - November 18, 20 - What kind of Public Sphere do we want? How could we build the public sphere we deserve?

We often react to how we believe the media or the public sphere has changed, but too seldom ask "What do we want the public sphere to do?" We transition into the final part of our class, asking questions about what media and social media could be and how they might effect society.

Reading for Tuesday, November 18:

Schudson, Six or Seven Things News Can Do for Democracy
(forthcoming)

Zuckerman, Six or Seven Things Social Media Can Do For Democracy

<https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/six-or-seven-things-social-media-can-do-for-democracy-66cee083b91a>

Reading for Thursday, November 20:

History of Public Broadcasting in the United States:

<https://current.org/timeline-the-history-of-public-broadcasting-in-the-u-s/>

BBC Timeline - 1920 - present:

<https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/timelines/1920s/>

- *In an environment of abundant media, is public media necessary?*
 - *Can public media be independent of the state that organizes it? Can a mistrustful populus ever have faith in public media?*
 - *What approaches to problems of the contemporary public sphere seem most plausible - legal ones, technical ones, economic or normative ones?*
-

Week 13 - November 25 - AI and Democracy

No reading

There is class on Tuesday the 25th, despite the fact that many students are likely to be on Thanksgiving Break. Because this is a class I know lots of students will have to miss, I don't want to teach "core material" for the course. But I also want to make sure this is a fun class for those who can make it. So I'll give a quick talk on something I am working on - Is AI good for democracy? - and we'll have an open discussion about it. It'll be fun. And there will probably be snacks.

Week 14 - December 2 - Beyond Access - What Lets us Participate in the Public Sphere?

Andrew Carnegie believed that libraries could act as an equalizer, allowing recent immigrants to improve themselves and be full participants in society. While his view may have been overly optimistic, it's clear that we need more than news and spaces for conversation to ensure the public sphere is accessible and inclusive.

History and Evolution of Public Education in the United States:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>

Klinenberg, Palaces for the People - Intro and Chapter 1

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vtX9DN4r0V1eHQqUD1w0lvnKbabNTHzx/view?usp=sharing>

December 4 - Fixing Social Media, Saving Democracy?

Social media has become a scapegoat for a variety of social ills, from anxiety and body image issues in young women to polarization and the projected “death of democracy”. It’s a lot of power to attribute to a relatively new part of the media ecosystem, though as we’ve learned this semester, media is central to any democratic society. Could we fix what’s wrong with social media? Would that help fix what’s wrong with democracy?

This may be one or two classes, depending on whether we need to make up any time from earlier in the semester, and readings will include some of the following:

Jonathan Haidt Wants You to Take Your Kid’s Phone Away:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CLpFm7p07Qwu-Ru5uZXOnZ13GT5xTRbo/view?usp=sharing>

Odgers, The great rewiring: is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness?

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00902-2>

Zuckerman, How Social Media Could Teach Us to be Better Citizens:

https://www.je-lks.org/ojs/index.php/Je-LKS_EN/article/view/1135818/1333

boyd, You Think You Want Media Literacy - Do You? -

<https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2>

How Democracies Die, excerpt:

<https://www.americanacademy.de/how-democracies-die/>

Week 15 - December 9 - Last Class!

For our last class, we will screen some of the best explainer videos, answer any questions about the final paper, complete course evaluations, etc.

Final paper is due December 15 at midnight

Your final paper is a solutions memo - we will discuss possible formats in class. You will identify a major problem facing media and democracy in our current world and discuss a possible solution. Key components include a single problem you’ve identified and want to solve, research

that helps establish the dimensions of that problem, a proposed solution (which may have multiple components) and research that demonstrates that your solution could work and could plausibly be implemented. Final paper should be about 2500 words and include citations.

