Networked Publics: Theories and Encounters

Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism
University of Southern California

Tuesday, 2-4:50pm
Location: ASC-230

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-3pm in ANN-310b (or email for appointment)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Intended for PhD students in Communication, this course is an in-depth examination of the idea of a democratic public sphere, with a special focus on how it appears in the design and use of networked information infrastructures meant to support free speech. Students will closely read and evaluate different theories and accounts of publicness (e.g., Calhoun, Dewey, Habermas, Young, Fraser, Baker, Fiss, Taylor), use these to critique sociotechnical systems that claim to serve public functions, and leave the course with theoretically grounded, normative and analytical frameworks with which to engage different meanings of ‘public’.

This class will be a chance for students to do three things: (1) read some foundational literature on public spheres; (2) experiment with connecting this literature to contemporary examples of public spheres; (3) craft critiques of both public spheres examples and theories. Each week we will examine a different system, institution, event, or organization though the lens of public sphere theories, developing grounded interpretations of public sphere examples. By the end of the course, students should be able to talk about public spheres from different theoretical and normative perspectives, appreciate the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in them, and make critiques of contemporary, networked public spheres.

The course is organized into 6 themes:

1. Foundations & Models
2. Norms & Ideals
3. Laws & Institutions
4. Sizes & Scales
5. Designs & Practices
6. Imaginings & Innovations

The readings are designed to address weekly “thought questions” that guide students’ reflections as they encounter different theories and examples of public spheres. Essentially, the entire course is focused on a single question: what are networked public spheres and why do they matter?
**EXPECTATIONS & NORMS**

Students are expected to be present and focused in each meeting; a course like this works best when students engage with the readings and each other thoughtfully, professionally, and attentively. See this as a space to practice critiquing ideas and your fellow students as colleagues. Please use computers for note taking only, silence phones before each meeting begins, and refrain from having back-channel or side conversations. Your participation is crucial. Please speak up, take risks, and experiment with taking new perspectives you wouldn’t normally adopt. It is also critically important that you do each week’s readings and that you meet the deadlines for the weekly memos – in a course like this you can’t afford to fall behind on the readings or come to class unprepared.

**Statement for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

**Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: [http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/). Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: [http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/).

**Stress Management**

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

**Your @usc.edu Email Address**

Please be sure that you either check your @usc.edu email address regularly OR that you forward it to the email address you do check regularly. If you forward your @usc.edu address, make sure that you are not also keeping copies on the USC email server (or that you clear those messages regularly). I ask you to do this because class messages I send out through Blackboard go to your @usc.edu address; students often accidentally go “over quota” on their @usc.edu account and, if they do, I have no way of electronically communicating with them. To manage your @usc.edu email account, see instructions here: [http://itservices.usc.edu/email/central/forwarding/](http://itservices.usc.edu/email/central/forwarding/).
**Laptop & Phone Policy**

Your phone must be switched **off** during class and I will ask you to turn it off if I see you using it. You may use your laptops in class but **only** to take notes, research issues that arise during class, or otherwise add to the seminar’s conversation. Research shows that using phones or laptops in class for things other than class work harms your learning and that of those around you. **If I think laptops are distracting others, I may ban them from class at any time.**

**FAQs**

**Q: Can I miss class?**

A: Please don’t. A class like this really depends upon people doing the reading, showing up, asking good questions, and engaging with everyone present. That said, if you’re truly ill or have a great reason to be absent, please send me an email letting me know that you’re missing class.

**Q: Can I submit a memo or paper late?**

A: No, please don’t. Weekly memos will not be accepted after the due date and all other papers will be graded down a partial letter grade for each day the paper is late. *E.g.*, a B-plus paper that is one day late will be given a B; an A paper that is one day late will be given an A-minus. The idea here is not to have a strict and unreasonable late policy, but to ensure that students have an equal amount of time to do their work. Of course, if you have a valid medical or personal emergency please email me as soon as possible and we’ll work something out.

**Q: What happens when I send you a question over email?**

A: I generally answer emails within 24 hours, often faster. (If I’m traveling it might be a bit longer.) If it’s a more involved question that doesn’t need an immediate reply I might suggest that we meet during my office hours instead. I generally don’t answer email on weekends or on weekdays after 7pm.

**Q: Can I communicate with you over Twitter or Facebook or other social media about the class?**

A: No, please don’t. Social media are great, but email is where I do course business so that I can write more than 140 characters, and not worry about whether I need to “friend” or “follow” students in order to communicate.

**Q: When can I meet with you?**

A: My office hours are Wednesdays 2-3pm in ANN-310b. I’d prefer that you come by during this time, but if you can’t make it, email and we’ll find another time.

**Q: Can I use this seminar to work on a dissertation chapter or prospectus?**

A: The point of this seminar is to give you time to think deeply about a new body literature, hear your colleagues’ analyses, and help you build frameworks for future research. This seminar should certainly complement your dissertation research. It’s a place to try out relevant research questions and explore empirical settings – but, from weekly memos to your final project, you should always generate *original* work in this seminar, never re-using writing you’ve already done for other classes or your dissertation.
EVALUATION

**Weekly Reading Memos (20%)**
Each week, you will write a short, approximately 500-word memo that engages with at least two of the week’s readings. You have considerable freedom: you can pose questions you had as you read; contrast readings; connect themes you saw emerging among texts; critique authors’ arguments; situate texts in relation to networked technologies. The goal is to reflect upon the readings and share reflections with your classmates so you arrive to class ready to participate. Memos will be graded as such:

‘check-plus’ = thoughtful and sophisticated analysis that moves a conversation forward
‘check’ = a good effort that contributes to class, but could have been stronger
‘minus’ = not quite up to expectations, let’s talk in person about how to improve

Please distribute each week’s memo to the entire class, through Blackboard, by 7pm of the Monday night before Tuesday’s class.

**‘Opening’ Readings (15%)**
Four (4) times during the semester, you will individually ‘open’ one of the readings. I’ll say more in class about what this means, but the ideal opening: stays close to the text (no divergences until we have a shared, grounded understanding of the author’s argument); situates the text in relation to other readings and the course themes; and moves conversation forward, generating new research questions that critique and extend the text.

**Public Sphere Systems (15%)**
Twice during the semester, you will lead a discussion on a public sphere system. These may be systems that you discussed in your weekly memo or systems that you would like to think through as a group in the context of the week’s readings. Please be ready to discuss, for example: why you think it is an instance of a public sphere, who participates in it, what norms are embedded in its design, where its content comes from, how it is regulated (broadly construed), how you might study it, what research questions you would like to ask through it, what its history is, who is responsible for maintaining it, how it relates to this week’s readings. (If you learned about the system from a news or trade press article, please feel free to email those articles beforehand through Blackboard.)

**Project proposal (10%) :: Due Tuesday, November 18**
In preparation for your final project (see below), you will submit a proposal that describes what you’re going to do, what theories or questions you’ll be working with, what literature you’re using or analyzing, what research methods you’ll be using, what your timeline is, and any resources you require. This is meant to be a check-in so that you and I can understand what your final project will be and what you need to make it successful.

**Final project (40%) :: Due Tuesday, December 16**
You have considerable freedom to decide the topic of your final project, but I ask you to choose one of the following formats: (1) a traditional “deep analysis” paper (5,000-6,000 words) in which you identify, analyze, and synthesize among a body of literature on some aspect of public spheres; (2) a system
evaluation paper (5,000-6,000 words) that is essentially a more in-depth public sphere case study (it must be a different example) in which you engage more deeply with theory and analyze gaps in theoretical literature and/or system design; (3) a system design in which you prototype a new example public sphere (we can discuss different design approaches and prototyping materials) and write a description (3,000 words) of how your prototype connects to the theoretical literature and course concepts. For this system design option, you are encouraged to work in a group to prototype the system, but each group member must submit his/her own description paper.

For all formats and papers, you are encouraged to use the readings we’ve discussed in class, consult the “recommended/supplemental” reading list at the end of the syllabus, and find sources of your own. I will say more about this project in class. In the final class, you will give a 10-15 minute presentation on the state of your final project, getting feedback from the class that should feed into your final paper submission (due during the exam period).
Depending on how the course unfolds, I may change the order of readings, or swap some for readings from the ‘recommended’ list at the end of the syllabus. If so, I will give you 2 weeks’ notice.

**Week #1, August 26 :: Introduction & Overview**

Introductions, review the syllabus, course themes and expectations. Discuss contemporary examples of networked public spheres and how they relate to course themes.

**QUESTIONS:**

- What is your definition of a public sphere? What public spheres do you participate in? What do you expect of public spheres, how do you know when one is ‘working’? What do you think the norms and values of a public sphere should be, why, and how do you see these instantiated in networked infrastructure design?

**Week #2, September 2 :: Foundations & Models (Part One)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

- How have different authors historically conceptualized the public sphere? What is included and excluded within each idea of “public” and how does it relate to the concept of a “public good”? What does each theory of the public assume about individuals, how they behave, and why they associate with each other? How can we analytically and empirically distinguish among: group, market, community, and public?

**READINGS**


**Week #3, September 9 :: Foundations & Models (Part Two)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What does Calhoun say qualifies as a Habermasian public sphere? How does he interpret Habermas’s readings of particular time periods and material conditions? Where do these conditions exist (or do not exist) today? What are Friedland et al.’s and Benson’s critiques of Habermas? And, thinking back to last week’s idea of the “unencumbered self”, how can a critique of individualism become a critique of Habermas’s public sphere?

**READINGS**


**Week #4, September 16 :: Norms & Ideals (Part One)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What connections do they make among the ideals of participation, civil society, and the public sphere? What models of change are implied or advocated for by the different authors? What empirical or theoretical evidence do they use to support their claims?

**READINGS**


Week #5, September 23 :: Norms & Ideals (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does each author critique the idea of public spheres *through* a critique of identity, participation, expression, and community? How might earlier models of public spheres be revised to take into account their critiques?

READINGS


Week #6, September 30 :: Laws & Institutions (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How do different types of state media governance suggest different visions of democracy? What is the role of the state in establishing or regulating the public sphere? What rationales are offered for state involvement in a public sphere? Why are these questions for Communication scholars?

READINGS


Week #7, October 7 :: Laws & Institutions (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does the First Amendment relate to the idea of the public sphere? How does U.S. Supreme Court First Amendment case law help us understand the court’s interpretation of public sphere? What images of the public do Bollinger, Fiss, and Schauer assume and how do these images influence their thinking about the press as a public institution?

READINGS


Recommended:

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Week #8, October 14 :: Sizes & Scales (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What sizes and scales of the public sphere are assumed in each aggregation technology? How are they described or justified by appeals to democratic values? What exactly is being counted, and what assumptions do these aggregations make about the political dynamics of individuals and collectives? Who has power to make or resist these aggregations?

READINGS


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Week #9, October 21 :: No physical meeting, alternate arrangement TBD
Week #10, October 28 :: Sizes & Scales (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How is Benkler’s network like and unlike the models of public sphere discussed so far? What types of power appear within and are absent in his model of the network? How does Peters see quantification and storytelling working to co-create a sense of scale? How do Salmon & Glasser use the idea of political consent to critique the creation of large-scale aggregates?

READINGS


Week #11, November 4 :: Designs & Practices (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What does each author argue is required from forms and practices? How do these requirements map to the normative models of the public sphere we’ve considered so far? How are norms and ideals cast into forms and actions in these authors’ examples?

READINGS


Week #12, November 11 :: Designs & Practices (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What images of the public are invoked or critiqued in the design thinking described by this week’s authors? How does the public appear in either design processes or products? Thinking back to last week’s discussion of platforms, how do these ethics of design map to norms of public sphere platforms?

READINGS


Week #13, November 18 :: Imaginings & Innovations (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
Recalling Taylor’s notion of a “social imaginary” from the first week, what is being imagined or explored by Gillespie, Kelty, and Tufekci? What assumptions are being made about publics and public spheres in each? How do individuals, groups, public goods, and democratic values appear in each exploration, and how they map to features and dynamics of the systems discussed?

READINGS


Week #14, November 25 :: Imaginings & Innovations (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What does it mean to ethically study networked public spheres? We'll consider the controversy surrounding the PNAS Facebook study, focusing on the perspectives and assumptions it surfaced about how to make, maintain, participate within, and ethically intervene in networked public spheres.

READINGS
The readings on this topic are still emerging and will be announced with at least 2 weeks’ notice. Please suggest pieces you would like to discuss on this topic.

Week #15 :: Student Presentations & Course Wrap-Up
Final Papers Due Tuesday, December 16th

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS, ORGANIZED BY WEEKS & TOPIC

WEEKS 2 & 3 :: FOUNDATIONS & MODELS


**WEEKS 4 & 5 :: NORMS & IDEALS**


**WEEKS 6 & 7 :: LAWS & INSTITUTIONS**


WEEKS 8 & 10 :: SIZES & SCALES


**WEEKS 11 & 12 :: DESIGNS & PRACTICES**


WEEKS 13 & 14 :: IMAGININGS & INNOVATIONS


