Networked Publics: Theories and Encounters

Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism
University of Southern California

Tuesday, 2-4:50pm
Location TBA

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Office Hours: TBA (or email for appointment)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Intended for graduate or senior undergraduate students in Communication and Journalism, 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 through the lens of public sphere theories, practicing developing grounded interpretations of public sphere examples. By the end of the course, students should be able to talk about the idea of a public sphere from different theoretical and normative perspectives, appreciate the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in public spheres, and analyze contemporary examples of public spheres.

The course is organized into 6 themes:

1. Foundations & Models
2. Law & Structures
3. Norms & Ideals
4. Sizes & Scales
5. Forms & 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 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 reading reaction papers – 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/. 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/.
FAQs

Q: Can I miss class?
A: No, 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 paper late?
A: No, please don’t. Weekly reading reaction papers will not be accepted late 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 to check if it’s okay to submit a late paper.

Q: What happens when I send you a question over email?
A: I’ll 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 have a record of our conversations, 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 TBD and I’ll announce these in class. I’d prefer that you come by during this time, but if you really can’t make that time and it’s urgent, please email me to set up a time.

Q: Why should I take this class?
A: I think Communication and Journalism are two of the most dynamic and important fields of study and practice today. There are so many issues, technologies, and events they touch upon and impact. Embedded in almost all of their different innovations, though, are assumptions about what the public sphere is, what ‘public’ means (or should mean), and what role individuals and groups should play in media environments. My aim in this course is to give you space to think through and experiment with ideas of the public sphere so that you can be ready to critique or create the next innovations in novel ways, or ask old questions of new sociotechnical systems. Ideally, you leave this course with a better sense of what public spheres can be – and why they matter.
EVALUATION

Reading Reaction Papers (15%)
Each week, you will write a short, approximately 500-word response paper that engages with at least two of that week’s readings. You can pose questions, contrast two or more readings, connect themes you saw emerging among the readings, or make an argument in opposition to the readings. The goal is to give you a chance to reflect upon the readings, share your reflections with your classmates, and demonstrate critical engagement with the readings so you can arrive in class prepared to participate. These papers are evaluated using a broad grading system:

‘check-plus’ = a very thoughtful take on the readings that moves a conversation forward
‘check’ = a good effort and result that makes a contribution to class, but could be stronger
‘minus’ = not quite up to expectations, let’s talk in person about how to do better

Please post each week’s reaction paper to the class blog (http://comm599publicspheres.wordpress.com/) by 7pm of the Sunday night before Monday’s class.

‘Opening’ Readings (15%)
Twice during the semester, you will individually (or as a team, depending on numbers) ‘open’ one of the readings. I’ll say more in class about what this means, but it is essentially a more in-depth reaction paper in which you carefully and closely consider one or more readings, summarize their main points and tensions for us, and discuss what you see as their strengths and weaknesses and connections to course themes.

Public Sphere Case Studies (15%)
OPTION #1 (larger class): Once during the semester, you will present a case study of a public sphere. I will provide more detail on this in class but it’s essentially a chance for you to choose an example of a public sphere (an online system, institution, event, organization), read it critically for its theoretical and normative assumptions, discuss how a theory does or does not account for the system, and suggest grounded improvements in a theory or system. I encourage you to choose your own example and I’m quite flexible on what counts as an example, but I can also provide you with a list of examples from which to choose.

OPTION #2 (smaller class): Every week, please bring to class two (2) example systems to discuss. These may be systems that you discussed in the reading reaction papers 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 they are instances of a public sphere, what questions they raise, who participates in them, where their content comes from, how you might study them and what research question you would like to ask, what their history is, who is responsible for maintaining them. (If you learned about the system from a news or trade press article, please feel free to email those articles beforehand, or reference them on the blog.)

Project proposal (10%)
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 (45%)**

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.
Please note: Depending on students’ reactions and how the course unfolds, I may want to change the order of some of these readings, or swap some of these for readings from the ‘recommended’ list at the end of the syllabus. If so, I will be sure to give you 2 weeks’ notice.

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Week #1 :: Introduction & Overview

Introductions, review the syllabus, course themes and expectations. Do an in-class reading exercise and examine a public sphere technology together.

**DISCUSSION 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’?

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Week #2 :: Foundations & Models (Part One)

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

What does it mean to study “the public”? How do different authors conceptualize the public sphere? What is included and excluded within each idea of “public”?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**

Presented by instructor.
Week #3 :: Foundations & Models (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does Habermas define the public sphere? How is this public sphere tied to its time period and material conditions? What is Fraser’s critique of Habermas? What is your critique of Habermas?

READINGS


CASE STUDY
Presented by instructor.

Week #4 :: Law & Structures (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
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 studies?

READINGS


CASE STUDY
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.
# Week #5 :: Law & Structures (Part Two)

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does the First Amendment relate to the idea of the public sphere? How does Supreme Court First Amendment case law help us understand the public sphere? What images of the public do Fiss and Horwitz presume?

## READINGS

## CASE STUDY
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.

# Week #6 :: Norms & Ideals (Part One)

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does each author understand “participation” and what connections do they make between participation and the public sphere? What democratic values are attached to participation and what examples are offered? Who is assumed to be participating?

## READINGS

## CASE STUDY
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.
Week #7 :: Norms & Ideals (Part Two)

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
How does Cohen describe the ideals and aims of deliberative democracy? What critiques do the authors make of the participation and deliberation as democratic ideals?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.

Week #8 :: Sizes & Scales (Part One)

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What size and scale of public does each author presume and why? What aspects of a public sphere work at some scales but not others? What technologies are implicated in creating different scales of public spheres?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.
Week #9 :: Sizes & Scales (Part Two)

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What technologies of aggregation appear in the readings and how are they described or justified by appeals to democratic values? How do these aggregations model individuals? Who has power to make or resist these aggregations, and how are they subsequently used or made meaningful?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.

Week #10 :: Forms & Practices (Part One)

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
How and where does each author locate the public sphere (profession, institution, market)? Recalling the discussion of norms and ideals, what does each space assume or offer, e.g., in terms of diversity, public engagement, participation deliberation?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.
**Week #11 :: Forms & Practices (Part Two)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
How is the public represented in each example below? What kind of agency or power do they have? What are the relationships between the representation of public opinion and the design of the public sphere?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.

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**Week #12 :: Imaginings & Innovations (Part One)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
Using Taylor’s notion of a “social imaginary”, what is being imagined or explored in each of the other readings? What assumptions are being made about publics and public spheres in each? How do individuals, groups, public goods, and democratic values appear in each article?

**READINGS**


**CASE STUDY**
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.
THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What technological forms appear in each writing? How are new public spheres realized in each, what assumptions about democratic values does each article explore? What types of experiments in public spheres are missing from this list?

READINGS


CASE STUDY
Presented by student or team of students; see instructor for suggestions.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
WikiLeaks, Chelsea Manning, Anonymous and Edward Snowden have all precipitated crises in the idea of the networked public sphere by upending traditional dynamics among state, civic, technological, and commercial actors. In this class we will revisit developments in one of these cases—or examine an emerging case—and use it as an opportunity to apply the seminar’s conceptual frameworks to a contemporary set of people and events.

READINGS


Week #15 :: Student Presentations

Week #16 :: Final Projects Due
RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS, ORGANIZED BY WEEKS & TOPIC

WEEKS 2 & 3 :: FOUNDATIONS & MODELS


WEEKS 4 & 5 :: LAWS & STRUCTURES


**WEEKS 6 & 7 :: NORMS & IDEALS**


WEEKS 8 & 9 :: SIZES & SCALES


WEEKS 10 & 11 :: FORMS & PRACTICES


WEEKS 12 & 14 :: IMAGININGS & INNOVATIONS


