This course introduces students to historical and contemporary debates around how publics are made, what they can look like, and what they should be. It traces normative models of the public across communication infrastructures, focusing on the role that networked information technologies play in how publics are imagined and realized.

Intended for PhD students in Communication, students will closely read and evaluate foundational accounts of publicness (e.g., Calhoun, Dewey, Habermas, Young, Fraser, Baker, Fiss, Taylor), examine newer work on the idea of networked publics in light of these historical accounts, and build toward a theoretically informed critique of a contemporary sociotechnical system that claims to serve public functions, or that students argue serves public functions.

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?

**Learning Objectives**

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, make critiques of contemporary, networked public spheres, and see connections between the study of public sphere communication infrastructures and sociotechnical systems.
**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. Website for DSP and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

**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 ([http://scampus.usc.edu/](http://scampus.usc.edu/)), the Student Guidebook, contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

**Emergency Preparedness / Course Continuity in a Crisis**
In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies. See the university's site on Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness: [http://preparedness.usc.edu/](http://preparedness.usc.edu/)

**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, that it doesn’t go over quota, or that you forward it to an email address you do check regularly. Your USC email the primary way for us to communicate and it is linked to Blackboard announcements.
**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: 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.

**Q: When can I meet with you?**
A: I’d prefer that you come by during my office hours (listed above), but if you can’t make it then, email me 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 Memos with Question (20%)** 
*Post to Blackboard every week by 7pm Monday*

Each week, you will write a short, approximately 350-500 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 be 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.*

**Peer Feedback on Memo (5%)**

Once during the semester you will give written feedback on one of your peer’s weekly memos and meet with them to discuss the feedback (a video / voice call is fine if scheduling is tricky). When it’s your turn to give feedback you’ll submit your review to me and the peer (a few paragraphs on the strengths and opportunities for improvement in your peer’s work); when it’s your turn to get feedback you’ll submit a short reflection on the feedback to me and your peer reviewer (just a couple of paragraphs on what you heard in the feedback and how you’ll address it going forward).

**‘Opening’ Readings (20%)**

Four times (4x) 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. You can make a hand-out or slides if you like, but neither is required.

**‘Opening’ Systems (10%)**

Twice (2x) during the semester, individually or in a pair, you will lead a discussion on a sociotechnical system that you think is relevant to the course’s public sphere themes. 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 (5%) :: Due November 8
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. In addition to this written proposal, I’m happy to meet with you 1-1 to discuss your plans.

Peer Feedback on Proposal (5%) :: Due November 15
In the spirit of the memo feedback, you will review one of your peer’s project proposal (someone different than the person whose memo you reviewed). As with the memo feedback, you’ll submit your review to me and your peer (a few paragraphs on the strengths and opportunities for improvement in your peer’s work); and you’ll submit a short reflection on the feedback to me and your peer reviewer (a couple of paragraphs on what you heard in the feedback and how you’ll address it going forward).

Final project (40%) :: Due December 8
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).
SCHEDULE

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 23 :: 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, August 30 :: 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 6 :: 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 is Benson’s critique of Habermas, how does Fung balance different priorities, and why have media scholars often focused on 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**


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**Week #4, September 13 :: 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 20 :: Norms & Ideals (Part Two)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How does each author critique the idea of a public sphere by highlighting some aspect of communication? How might earlier models of public spheres (e.g., Calhoun, Taylor, Habermas) be revised to take into account their critiques?

READINGS


Week #6, September 27 :: 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 4 :: No physical meeting, informal fieldwork assignment

Immerse yourself in some environment or experience you think of as a “public” and post a 300-500 word reflection to Blackboard. E.g., you might attend a physical community meeting in your neighborhood, go to a City Hall forum, join a Wikipedia page, observe a subreddit, follow a Twitter hashtag, or participate in something else that you consider to be a “public”. Tell us what you did, what you observed, and connect to at least 2 of the readings we’ve discussed so far.

Week #8, October 11 :: 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, Schauer, and Strömbäck assume are possible and how do these images influence their thinking about the press as a public institution?

READINGS


Recommended:
**Week #9, October 18 :: Sizes & Scales (Part One)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What kind of publics do different scales of communication give rise to? Where is the transnational public sphere, and what kinds of diversity does the concept of multiculturalism require or create?

**READINGS**


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**Week #10, October 25 :: Sizes & Scales (Part Two)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**
What public spheres are assumed in aggregation technologies designed to harness and rationalize the scale and diversity discussed last week? 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 aggregations?

**READINGS**


Week #11, November 1 :: Designs & Practices (Part One)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
How are platforms, infrastructures, social media, and utilities like or unlike publics? What forms of association does each create or require for its normative aims?

READINGS


Week #12, November 8 :: Designs & Practices (Part Two)

-- PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE --

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
What images of the public are invoked or critiqued in Barry’s and Marres’s discussions of materiality? Are these “platforms” for publics, as discussed last week? How are the networked publics created through affective news challenges to Habermas? How do materials and practices appear in the account of Weibo publics?

READINGS


**Week #13, November 15 :: Imaginings & Innovations (Part One)**

--- PEER FEEDBACK ON PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE ---

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

Recalling Taylor’s notion of a “social imaginary” from the first week, what kind of publics are imagined or prototyped in algorithmic media? How does an algorithmically calculated public differ from the publics convened through polls, surveys, and questionnaires? What kind of research tools and environments are required to know networked publics?

**READINGS**


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**Week #14, November 22 :: Imaginings & Innovations (Part Two)**

**THOUGHT QUESTIONS**

How are publics made through design activities? How does the design and deployment of digital technologies in design settings relate to Gusfield’s account of the social construction of public problems?

**READINGS**


Week #15, November 29 :: Student Presentations & Course Wrap-Up
Final Papers Due Friday, December 9th

RECOMMENDED/SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS, ORGANIZED BY THEMES

FOUNDATIONS & MODELS


NORMS & IDEALS


**LAWS & INSTITUTIONS**


**SIZES & SCALES**


**DESIGNS & PRACTICES**


**IMAGININGS & INNOVATIONS**


