

The Digital Public Sphere

Culture, Social Media, and the Public Sphere

Exploring the ways digital communications technology shapes the form of our interpersonal discourse.

Seminar Proposal:

The public sphere is the place where people engage in rational-critical debate to formulate their value systems and their individual public selves as human beings. It is the space of political “action” as Hannah Arendt would say. But increasingly, this public space is dematerializing. Much of our culture’s political discourse is now happening online and facilitated by new digital communications technologies that could be fundamentally altering the way in which citizens engage one another. They have altered power structures allowing for what Harvard University’s Gary King has called, “the largest selective suppression of human expression in history” referring to Chinese state-sponsored censorship programs ([Harvard Magazine](#), 2013). On the other hand, the technologies have had the power to bring people together and create entirely new “publics.” It has allowed mob rule to destroy the life of an innocent woman who made a bad joke (Ronson) and it has simultaneously raised platforms for high-level intellectual debate. How are contemporary digital communications technologies changing the way we engage one another in rational-critical intersubjective dialogue? Perhaps more importantly, how can human beings best take control of these radical transformations to encourage the acquisition and development of knowledge against the insidious forces of ignorance and misinformation?

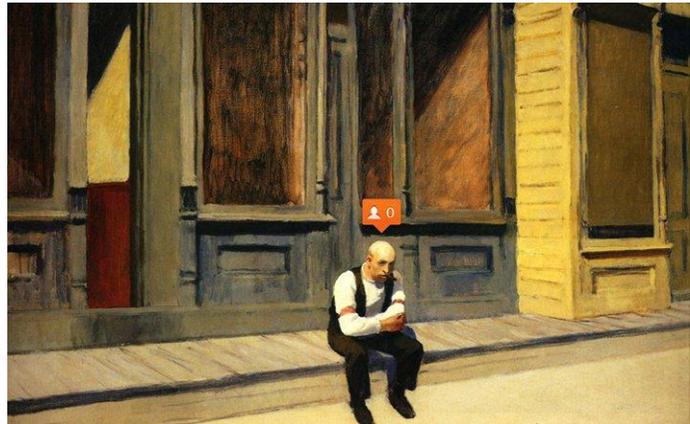
This seminar will attempt to analyze various communications platforms, cultural movements, and social theories so that participants might gain an enlightened understanding of the contemporary situation of the public sphere. The seminar will begin with readings and discussions about the public sphere generally. “Public Sphere Theory” as it is currently understood originated in the 20th Century with the German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the Marxist circles of the Frankfurt School. Habermas defines the public sphere as the place of competing opinions “where” rational individuals are able to engage critically about essentially any topic, but specifically culture and politics. Karl Popper is also an important philosopher and defender of liberal democracy. *Open Society and Its Enemies* focuses on the challenges facing liberal democracy by analyzing the tendencies of Platonism, Helegalianism, totalitarianism, fascism, and how these ideologies tend to undermine the ideals of liberal free expression. Finally, Hannah Arendt provides an applicable analysis of the influence of technology on the public sphere by dividing up the ideas of work, labor, and action, and arguing over against the technological determinism of the dominant Marxist historical narrative.

But these works of philosophy can only act as the grounding of a further analysis of the contemporary circumstances. The seminar will subsequently delve into cultural analysis. We will look at the effects of social media on community groups and the dissemination of information through the digital medium (Vosoughi et al). We will discuss whether the course of technological development should be viewed with optimism or pessimism.

Author and Programmer Richard Brodie, who developed Microsoft Word, uses the scientific evidence of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett to substantiate the dramatic claim that the contemporary person is infected with a virus of the mind connected to meme culture and the information superhighway that is the internet. His analysis is related to the larger “field” of “memetics” which seeks to understand the phenomenon of the internet meme as a piece of information which spreads through society and resides in the minds of those who encounter it.

Finally, the seminar will seek to analyze a number of artifacts (mostly just websites) given the philosophical, sociological, political, and psychological backgrounds described above. These artifacts will engage an even broader range of academic disciplines including literature, art, film, and web design. Participants will explore websites that are relevant to the topics of rational discourse and others which spread irrational information. There are sites which attempt to engage their audiences with a mission of structuring intellectual discourse online in a way that would make it potentially radically more productive like Abridge News, Kailo, and Debatemap. Other sites are the hosts to insidious conspiracy theories and misinformation like educate-yourself.org and 4chan. Suggested sites for investigation and analysis are listed for each meeting.

We will also engage the works of the writer Ray Bradbury who paints a dark picture of the no-so-distant-future with his short story “The Veldt.” Other artistic works also paint a dark image of the future like the films “The Circle” and “Ready Player One.” Ukrainian artist Nastya Ptichuk’s “Emoji-Nation” art exhibit which has received a great deal of attention for its re-interpretation of famous works of art. Ptichuk strategically places common emojis and software dialogue boxes into the iconic paintings that makes for a dramatic and chilling commentary on contemporary social relations by emphasizing the lack of in-person spatialized interaction in the contemporary world.



Proposed Seminar Structure:

Each meeting will be structured around a particular question. One or a few core texts will be central to each meeting and all participants will prepare for the meeting by reading these core texts. Each meeting will also have a large number of secondary texts. Individual participants will be responsible for preparing one or a few of the secondary texts in addition to the core texts. Finally, each meeting will have one or two artifacts which the group might look over beforehand and talk about collectively. Participants will find it beneficial to browse the artifacts for a while to get a feel for their structure and the type of content being presented. Engagement with some of these artifacts, where applicable, might be particularly interesting.

Group or Individual Projects:

To conclude the seminar, participants might consider working on a final project. I am making this suggestion because the course is dealing with practical problems at large and small scales. Recent Plenaries have proven that discourse at Haverford, particularly, is fraught with distrust, misunderstandings and vulnerability. Participants in this seminar will be gaining knowledge about these problems and I think this knowledge should be put to work by designing something that can help the community heal and better facilitate inter-group dialogue (at Haverford or otherwise). I imagine the project to be of the participant's own design and being geared to their particular strengths as a student. This could be an art project, a painting, a film, a short story, a formal paper, a newspaper article, a slideshow presentation, a website design, an app design, a tri-fold poster, a literature review, a proposal for a larger project, or something else. Meeting 5 will be a good place for us to share our ideas and drafts of projects. After the final meeting of the seminar, we can share discussion about the projects electronically.

Meetings:

Below is a list of meeting plans for the seminar. There are only five meetings planned, which is the minimum requirement for the seminar. These meetings, however, are packed with information and it will understandably be hard to get through everything. I suggest that there be the option of including additional meetings at the discretion of the group. These will be called "floating meetings" and I would expect us to have about two of them.

Field Trip Ideas:

I have provided three potential field trip options and the group can decide if they want to undertake any of them. I have left out much of the planning for this part of the proposal so that the group itself can have a say in where it is they would like to go and what they would like to visit. Also, the trip proposals to New York and Washington DC probably include more proposed site visits than would be feasible in a single day and we would want to potentially narrow those options down. All of this meta-planning can be done over a simple group chat either over the summer or even before the first meeting begins.

Meeting 1: What is the public sphere?

At our first meeting, we will focus on constructing a philosophical understand of what the public sphere is and how it functions. We will focus on creating a model of the public sphere and defining terms, and forces within the public sphere.

Primary text:

- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

Secondary Texts:

- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Part II “The Public and the Private Realm.” Second Edition. The University of Chicago Press. pp. 22-78.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Oxford University Press: 2010. Print.
- Floyd, Juliet and James E. Katz. *Philosophy of Emerging Media*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1992.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. Knopf: New York, 1977.
- Kant, Immanuel. “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?” 1784.
- Foucault, Michel. “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” 1984.
- [Pythean Heights](#). “Slavoj Zizek: Political Correctness and Cultural Taboos.” YouTube: *youtube.com*, 18 March 2018. Web.

Artifacts:

- [Kialo.com](#)
- [Breitbart.com](#)



Lee, Alexander. "Distracted."
Artspace.com. Acrylic on Board. [Link](#)

Meeting 2: What are digital communications technologies, and how do they affect our discourse?

Our second meeting will focus on the ways in which discourse is affected by digital communications technology. We will discuss the "mob" tendencies of internet trolls and, generally, the effects that digital technologies can have on human action.

Primary Text:

- Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin Press: New York, 2015.

Secondary texts:

- [Ronson, Jon](#). "How One Tweet can Ruin Your Life." *youtube.com*. Ted Talk. 2015.
- [Last Week Tonight](#). "Public Shaming." Hosted by John Oliver. *youtube.com*: 17 Mar. 2019. Television Show.
- Ptichek, Nastya. "Emoji-nation." Art exhibit. [Link](#).
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Translated by Harry Zohn. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Schocken/Random House: 1936. [Link](#).
- [Ornstein, Norman J., John C. Fortier, and Jennifer Marsico](#). "Creating a Public Sphere in a Challenging Media Age." American Enterprise Institute: Washington, D.C., 23 June 2011. [Link](#). [PDF Download](#).

Artifact:

- [Debatemap.live](#)

Meeting 3: Where has the interaction between the public sphere and digital communications technologies produced dangerous or misinformed discourses?

Our third meeting will focus on censorship and anonymity on the internet including the state-sponsored censorship in China, corporate social media censorship in the United States.

Primary Texts:

- Rainie, Lee, Janna Anderson, and Jonathan Albright. "The Future of Free Speech, Trolls, Anonymity, and Fake News Online." Pew Research Center: 29 Mar. 2017. Web. [Link](#).
- Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The spread of true and false news online." Vol. 359, Issue 6380. Science Magazine: 9 Mar. 2018. pp. 1146-1151. [Link](#).

Secondary Texts:

- King, Gary, et al. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107, no. 2, 2013, pp. 326–343.
- [Das, Sauvik, AND Kramer, Adam](#). "Self-Censorship on Facebook" *International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2013): n. pag. Web. 3 Mar. 2019.
- [Suedfeld, P. , Steel, G. D. and Schmidt, P. W.](#) "Political Ideology and Attitudes Toward Censorship." ed. 24. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1994. pp. 765-781.
- Samuels, Elyse. "How Q-anon, the bizarre pro-Trump conspiracy theory, took hold in right-wing circles online." *The Washington Post*, 2017. [Link](#).
- The Rubin Report. "We Are Leaving Patreon: Dave Rubin and Jordan Peterson Announcement." *youtube.com*. Youtube: 1 Jan. 2019. Web. [Link](#).

Artifact:

- [Reddit.com](#)
 - Marantz, Andrew. "Reddit and the Struggle to De-toxify the Internet." *The New Yorker*: 19 Mar. 2018. Web. [Link](#).
- [Educate-yourself.org](#)
- [4chan.org](#)

Meeting 4: Meeting Four: Where has this interaction produced positive or optimistic discourses?

Primary Text:

- Charles “Chip” P. Linscott. “All Lives (Don’t) Matter: The Internet Meets Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism.” *Black Camera*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, pp. 104–119.

Secondary Texts:

- Sampedro, Víctor and Mayra Martínez Avidad. “The Digital Public Sphere: An Alternative and Counterhegemonic Space? The Case of Spain.” *International Journal of Communication*, 2018. pp. 23-44. [PDF Download Link](#).
- Pullen, Christopher and Margaret Cooper. *LGBT Identity and Online News Media*. Routledge, 2010.
- Citizen Engagement. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2011.
- Perry, David. “How to Beat Demagogues Online.” *Pacific Standard*: 28 Nov. 2018. Web. [Link](#).
- Brodie, Richard. *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*.
- Megan Phelps-Roper. “I Grew Up in the Westborough Baptist Church.” *Ted.com*, Feb. 2017. Web. Video. [Link](#).
- Staruski, Joseph. “The Harm of Epistemic Injustice.” Not published.

Artifact:

- [AbridgeNews.com](#)

Meeting 5: What potential interventions can be made and what types of art and culture serve best the task of making said interventions?

Primary Objective:

- This class will not have a primary text. Instead, students will be expected to come to class with a discussion question and the beginnings of a final project. In the first part of the meeting, students will exchange their questions respectively with a question from one of their fellow students. We will spend time writing responses to these questions. We will then share and discuss our answers to the questions. We will also reflect on what we learned during this course. Finally, we will take time to give each other feedback on our draft final projects.

Secondary Texts:

- *Ready Player One*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Warner Brothers Amblin Entertainment and Village Roadshow Pictures: 29 Mar. 2018.
- *The Circle*. Directed by James Ponsoldt. Performances by Emma Watson and Tom Hanks. Image Nation Abu Dhabi, Playtone, Likely Story, and IM Global: 2017.
- Bradbury, Ray. "The Veldt." *The Saturday Evening Post*: 23 Sept. 1950.

Artifact:

- spaceshipmedia.org

Field Trip Idea 1:

Nerdfighters Meetup

There has been a very large audience for content created by John and Hank Green, two brothers who are authors philanthropists and YouTube superstars. They started the channels vlogbrothers and crash course and John is the author of *The Fault in our Stars*. Their large audience has formed into an online community of people who call themselves "nerdfighters." There are many groups who meet regularly in the New York and Philadelphia areas and it might be interesting to go visit one of their in-person meetings.

Field Trip Idea 2:

D.C. Think Tanks

Washington DC is full of think tank organizations that do research and propose solutions to all kinds of different problems facing the contemporary world. Many of them have staff working specifically on the topic of digital discourse. One of our field trip options would be to tour a number of think tanks and media organizations. A preliminary list could include the Brookings Institute, The Cato Institute, The Heritage Foundation, the Pew Research Center, the Electronic Privacy Information Center and the Washington Post. Most of these organizations are within a few blocks of each other, which greatly improves the feasibility of the trip. Further planning for this trip would require us to reach out to representatives from these organizations and set up meetings or briefings with some of their specialists.

Potential Speakers:

Chris Satullo

Former VP of News and Civic Dialogue at WHYY and co-founder of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement at the University of Pennsylvania

Mr. Satullo would be a great choice for this project because he has been working with a passion for civic engagement in the Philadelphia area for decades and would be able to present an historical narrative of changes brought by digital communications technologies from his lived experiences.

Laura Carpenter and/or David Byas-Smith

Founders of Abridge News

Abridge News is one of the course artifacts that we will be examining and it is one of the emerging media platforms that is offering a concrete solution to the some of the problems we will be encountering in the seminar.

Field Trip Idea 3:

New York City Media Organizations

New York City would be an excellent place for us to visit because of its large number of media organizations. Many of them are transitioning to focus more on digital media and we can talk to them about what they see as challenges and what they like about using digital media platforms. Interesting and relevant organizations to visit would be the New Yorker, the Huffington Post, the Verge, and the New York Times. These media organizations are doing some fascinating things with digital technologies and the Huffington Post and the Verge are media organizations which publish online exclusively. There would also be options for visiting think tanks in New York City. The Manhattan Institute comes to mind, as well as the New School, where Hannah Arendt taught for much of her life. Much further planning would also be necessary for this trip as well to ensure that it runs smoothly.

Cover Page Image Citations:

Left column from top to bottom.

Reddit Logo. *reddit.com*.

[Venturini, Lionel](#). L'Humanité.

Abridge.com logo

[Peters, Mark](#). Letsgodigital.org.

Center column from top to bottom

Ptichek, Nastya. "Emoji-nation." Art exhibit. [Link](#).

[Gaganan, Mahita](#). Time Magazine. *Time.com*.

[Theepochtimes.com](#)

Right column from top to bottom

[David Acker](#). New York Times.

Facebook Logo.

[Samuels, Elyse](#). The Washington Post.

4chan logo

Potential Speakers:

Sherry Turkle

Professor of the Social Studies of Science and
Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of
Technology

Sherry Turkle stands at a fascinating crossroads in her studies which deal with emerging digital technologies and human social interactions. She says that digital technologies change who we are as people and how we interact with one another. Her book *Reclaiming Conversation* is a part of the seminar's suggested reading.