

Title of the course:

Journalism and Political Culture

Course Description

Journalism has long been understood as having a distinct, normative role in democracies. This is reflected in the ways we describe journalists as watchdogs scrutinizing those in power, and as responsible for the public informed about what is going on in politics and society. While these dynamics are still apparent in contemporary journalism, they have come under pressure in recent years. With politics trending towards dynamics of polarization and populism, and norm-breaking political actors challenging the status quo, recent developments have made it difficult for journalists to operate in the ways they were used to. Alongside these larger political shifts, technologies have allowed more people to comment on news, to present their own content as news, and to interweave political commentary and journalism in new ways, challenging our previous understanding of what journalism and politics should be.

With these challenges in mind, this course will explore theories and concepts that journalism has drawn on to make a case for its importance in society. We will consider questions such as: How can we understand the role of journalism in the context of an antagonistic style of politics that has emerged in Europe and North America? How do we think about journalism when coupled with new technologies that change our understanding of what journalism can be? We will also examine the political and technological developments that put pressure on these norms, including how journalism has responded (or might respond) to these challenges.

By following this course, students will gain a greater appreciation for the intersections of journalism and politics in our contemporary societies, and a stronger foundation to build on when trying to understand these.

Method of the course completion: *Fulfilling requirements* – In the last session we will have a colloquium and discussion to bring together the various discussions from the course.

Colloquium: Students work in pairs to pick one of the readings/themes we discuss in Block 1, 2, or 3. In the second half of the final teaching block, each pair will be expected to present their views on that topic in two to three minutes as a prompt for class discussion on that topic.

Course structure:

Lecture, with in-class discussions to expand on concepts.

Day 1, Block 1 – Normative Theories of Democracy

In the first block, we will discuss core theories of politics as it intersects with journalism, diving into theory from the start. Politics is about more than just elections – it is about power, and it extends beyond formal politics. Journalism is about more than news, it's about interactions between people and power. We will explore what this means.

Readings:

- Habermas, Jürgen (1964[1974]) 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', *New German Critique*, 3: 49-55. Translated by Sara Lennox & Frank Lennox. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/487737>
- Mouffe, Chantal (1999) 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?' *Social Research* 66(3): 745-758. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971349>

Day 1, Block 2 - Journalism in Democracy

In this block we expand our theoretical repertoire, reading key readings on dominant theories that allow us to make sense of the dynamics going on in journalism and politics. We will focus on Van Aelst and Walgraves' theorization of the function of news media, which will help us anchor our discussions of all manner of politics and journalism and a case study informed by recent news.

- Van Aelst, Peter and Walgrave, Stefan (2016) 'Information and Arena: The Dual Function of the News Media for Political Elites', *Journal of Communication* 66: 496-1518. At: <https://academic.oup.com/joc/article-abstract/66/3/496/4070496?redirectedFrom=PDF>

Day 2, Block 3 – Digital, alternative, political news

To start the second day of this course, we'll explore alternative and digital media and the way they've challenged our understanding of journalism and its normative contributions. We'll look at the way these media *might* contribute to more pluralist, democratic societies, but also where there pose serious concerns for journalism and democracy.

- Eldridge, S. A. (2019) "Where Do We Draw the Line? Interlopers, (Ant)agonists, and an Unbounded Journalistic Field" *Media and Communication* 7(4): 8-18. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/2295>
- Ihlebæk, K. A., Figenschou, T. U., Eldridge, S. A., Frischlich, L., Cushion, S., & Holt, K. (2022). Understanding Alternative News Media and Its Contribution to Diversity. *Digital Journalism*, 10(8), 1267–1282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2134165>

Day 2, Block 4 – Where do we go from here?

In the final block, we will reflect on the theories and discussions we had in this course to also look ahead. We will use this final class to think about our own prognoses for where journalism is heading and where politics are headed, which we will expand on in the colloquium. We will think critically about both the concerns and the opportunities that confront journalism and politics, and try to imagine what the future might hold.

Reading

- Eldridge, S. (2025) "Agonism and antagonism: Journalism in a fractured world", Chapter 8 in: *Journalism in a Fractured World* (pp. 193-209). Oxford: Peter Lang. Available at: <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1288791> [Open Access].

Colloquium: Students work in pairs to pick one of the readings/themes we discuss in Block 1, 2, or 3. In the second half of the final teaching block, each pair will be expected to present their views on that topic in two to three minutes as a prompt for class discussion on that topic.