PHIL 110 - Social Media & Democracy  

Syllabus

Class Schedule: MW 11-12:15 in 201 Healy  
Office Hours: 407 Healy Hall  
Wednesdays 12:15-2:15 and by appointment

Course Description:
The internet has radically changed the way people form beliefs, develop world views, and assess claims. Knowledge is in one sense more democratized, as traditional gatekeepers to news, science, and opinion have less power. Knowledge in another sense has become more elusive, as standards of evidence and vetting become vastly different; and theory building itself has changed. The 2016 election was influenced by the epistemology of the internet and the vulnerability of data: fake news, competing paradigms of evidence and expertise, Russian hacking of politically sensitive emails, and the effects of targeted news feeds. Given that most people access their information through digital means, the targeted flow of information threatens to divide our democracy. Is divided democracy inevitable or are there means for maintaining a robust democracy in the digital age? This course will examine questions of truth, democracy, and politics in the age of social media by drawing on contemporary case studies and philosophical tools from ethics, political philosophy, and epistemology. This course satisfies Georgetown's ethics distribution requirement.

This course takes place in Georgetown’s Ethics Lab, a hub for creative ethics education. Ethics Lab courses include collaborative activities and projects to help students learn to discern fundamental moral values at stake in contemporary issues, think creatively about how to approach complex problems, and cultivate responsible agency to become moral leaders.

Course Requirements:
In this course, students will learn how to engage critically with the readings and articulate well-supported views about the various philosophical problems we encounter. You will also engage in an Ethics Lab “ethics in action challenge” designed to help you connect your theoretical analysis of ethical issues to real world engagement.

To excel in this course, consider the following questions for each text: What is the author’s position and how is it supported within the argument? What objections could be raised and what impact do they have on the overall aims of the text? How could the author respond? I also encourage you to think about each view in light of your own considered judgments about the philosophical questions we discuss.

Participation: Come to class having read the day’s assignment closely and carefully, fully prepared to discuss the material.

Philosophy in the News: Each week, 3 students will be responsible for connecting our course material to current events in the world. Students can work together or independently. The key idea is to have point people each week keeping the class briefed on current events that are relevant to the topics we are studying in this class. Students should share links to the news on the Discussion section of Canvas during the week and will be expected to kick off class discussion with at least 2 probing questions for the class. Signup on Canvas. (5%)
**Weekly Skills-Building Exercises:** Each week there will be short exercises designed to help you cultivate the key skills needed for the larger assignments. They will be a mix of homework assignments, reading quizzes, writing prompts, and peer critique. (15%)

**Papers:** You will write two formal papers in this class. These are designed as opportunities to delve further into a philosophical problem we encounter and develop an original critical engagement with the relevant texts. (Paper 1: 20%; Paper 2: 25%)

**Ethics in Action Challenge Portfolio:** In this course you will be building key skills for tackling complex moral problems. The Ethics in Action Challenge is a capstone for the course, asking you to connect your understanding of the course material to the real world. You will be graded on a portfolio of your work, including your prototype, group presentation, and an individual essay connecting your project to the philosophers studied in the course. The group presentation occurs in the last week of classes and the individual essay connecting your project to the course readings replaces the final exam for the course. Further details will be provided with the assignment. (35%)

- **EIA Proposal Prototype & Presentation:** 15%
- **Individual EIA Essay:** 20% [Replaces the Final Exam for this Course]

**Grading Criteria:** An “A” indicates a sophisticated understanding of the material, demonstrating both subtle analysis and creative original thought. “B” reflects an above-average understanding of the material and reflects strong analytic skills. “C” level work is either flawed by some misunderstandings or by reliance on summary rather than independent analysis. You must complete all assignments in order to pass the class.

**Required Texts:** All course documents can be found on Canvas. Readings are provided for the purpose of this class only and remain subject to all the rights and restrictions of the publisher.

**Policies:**
- **Academic Integrity:** Georgetown’s honor code governs every assignment in the course. Plagiarism (submitting work you did not do yourself) or any form of cheating is unacceptable. Students will receive a zero on assignments that violate this policy.
- **Disability Services:** All students are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities at Georgetown University. If you require any accommodations to enable you to complete this course, please schedule a meeting with the Academic Resource Center (ARC). In addition to contacting the ARC, please discuss your situation with me so that I can best help you succeed.
- **Electronics:** may not be used during class without explicit permission from the instructor.
- **Late Work:** There is a late penalty of $\frac{1}{3}$ letter grade per day (e.g., B to B-). If there is an extenuating circumstance preventing you from completing the paper on time, you must receive an extension from Prof. Edenberg, in writing, at least 24 hours before the deadline.
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Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Readings are listed according to the date they are due to be completed.

The Challenge

Wed., August 29:  Course Introduction
David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”
Assignment Due: What social media and democracy means to me

Mon., September 3:  Labor Day: No Class


Assignment Due: My Social Media Footprint

The Role of Knowledge and Truth in Politics

Assignment Due: Argument Reconstruction Paragraph

Reading Quiz #1 (covering everything through today)

Guest Speaker on “Visualizing social media & democracy”

Mon., September 24:  Claudia Mills, “Politics and Manipulation”
Writing Workshop & Peer Review: Bring Drafts of Knowledge, Truth & Social Media Paper (counts for weekly skills building credit)

Divided Democracy

Wed., September 26:  John Rawls, Justice as Fairness, selections

Thurs., September 27:  Knowledge, Truth & Social Media Paper Due 9am, via Canvas

Mon., October 1:  Erin Kelly & Lionel McPherson, “On Tolerating the Unreasonable”
Introduce October’s Divided Democracy unit, the National Museum of American History context, and divided democracy assignments

Wed., October 3:  Sunstein, “Polarization” & “Cybercascades” in #Republic
Assignment Due: What’s my Filter Bubble?

Mon., October 8:  Mid-Semester Holiday: No Class
Reading Quiz #2 (covering 9/19-10/10)  
Assignment Due: What are we arguing about?

Mon., October 15: Iris Marion Young, “Difference as Resource for Democratic Communication”

Wed., October 17: David Estlund, “Democratic Authority” in *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*  
Assignment Due: Why is there disagreement?

Mon., October 22: Jason Brennan, “Hobbits and Hooligans” & “Civic Enemies” in *Against Democracy*

Special Event: Political Epistemology Workshop with Visiting Speakers

**Free Speech & Its Limits**

Mon., October 29: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, selections  
Assignment Due: The Patriotic Pilgrimage - Field Observations [assigned 10/1]

Writing Workshop & Peer Review: Bring Drafts of Paper 2 (counts for weekly skills building credit)

Mon., November 5: Ishani Maitra, “Subordinating Speech” in *Speech and Harm*

Tues., November 6: **Divided Democracy Paper Due at 9am via Canvas**  
Election Day

**Ethics In Action Challenge**  
*Additional readings will be added that are tailored to each group’s project*

Wed., November 7: Discussion to Wrap up First Part & Introduce Ethics In Action Challenge  
Assignment Due: Individual Proposals  
Reading Quiz #3 (10/15 - 11/5)

Mon., November 12: Groups Finalized & work to select 3 group ideas for the round robin

Wed., November 14: EIA: Group Idea Proposals Due & Round Robin Critique  
Guest Experts: National Museum of American History

Mon., November 19: EIA: Synthesize Feedback from Round Robin Critique & Narrow for Idea Testing over Thanksgiving Break

Wed., November 21: **NO CLASS. Class will be replaced with an EIA Idea Testing Individual Assignment to be completed over Thanksgiving Break**
Mon., November 26:  EIA: Discuss Feedback from Idea Testing & Group Work—Incorporate Feedback for the Final Proposal


Mon., December 3:  Ethics in Action Presentations

Wed., December 5:  Ethics in Action Presentations

Mon., December 10:  Course Conclusion & Debrief of the Ethics in Action Challenge

Tues., December 18:  **Individual EIA Essay Due at 9:00 am via Canvas**
This essay takes the place of a final exam for this class and is due at the time the university scheduled the final exam for this course.