

## **Truth, Lies and the Press: The Philosophy of Journalism**

Philosophy 27 \* Fall 2021

Professor Susanna Siegel \* [ssiegel@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ssiegel@fas.harvard.edu)

Meets Tuesdays/Thursdays, Noon-1:15pm

Office: Emerson 317

Office hours: after class and by appointment

### **Overview**

What is journalism? What is it for? What roles does it play in political life, and what roles should it play? Which of these roles are specific to democracy? Which of them, if any, are specific to American democracy? What should count as news? How should it be determined what's important for the public in a given place to know about? What are the benefits and pitfalls of professionalized journalism? What challenges and opportunities face journalists and journalism in the age of social media?

This class has three main segments. In the first and longest, we consider in chronological order the writings of four thinkers, their visions of politics, and of journalism's role in it: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, and Hannah Arendt. These thinkers addressed the political conditions during a range of politically challenging times: the rise of Jim Crow in the US; the aftermath of World War I; and the 1960's.

For each thinker, we will spend two sessions discussing original texts by the author, and a third session on contemporary work that reflects or reflects upon their vision of the political roles for journalism. These '3rd sessions' will give us a chance to consider the impact of news coverage on political history; whether people are really cut out for democracy; and how journalism can best deal with organized lying in the age of social media.

In the second segment, we turn to specific challenges for journalism to help us probe which ethical and epistemological principles should guide journalism. Topics include: the many guises of objectivity; issue framing; election coverage; leaks; disappearance of local news; and the apology movement by historically white newspapers.

In the last segment, we consider challenges to journalists and journalism from social media. Topics include propaganda and its roles in undermining liberal democracy; whether the First Amendment is obsolete when speech is plentiful rather than scarce; and proposals for using digital spaces to facilitate democratic participation in politics.

We'll begin with an overview of journalism in the US, beginning with decades before World War 1, so that we can see what American journalism did before the era of professionalization, which principles came to shape professionalized journalism starting in the 1920's, and how those principles, along with the practices done in their name, have evolved in the past century.

During the course we will hear from two guest speakers: investigative journalist Joe Sexton, and one other speaker TBA.

**Note: This course has a pre-assignment for the first lecture.** Read or listen to Ezra Klein's podcast with Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-nehisi Coates on the 1619 project and backlash. Link and transcript [here](#).

### **Texts**

Readings available in html are hyper-linked in the syllabus. All readings are in pdf's on the website, except for two books, which can be read on reserve, or purchased via Harvard Bookstore. In an effort to support local bookstores, no orders have been placed with the Harvard Coop. If you want to order any the books online, I suggest bookshop.org, which supports independently owned bookshops. You can also place orders directly with Harvard Book Store at Harvard.com .

### **Requirements**

This course is a mixture of philosophy, social theory, and U.S. history. Everyone will gain experience reading and writing philosophy. Philosophical writing is focused on problems addressed by a text. Sometimes the text articulates the problems fully, but often, it doesn't. Those of you interested in historical research will have a chance on one of the papers to work on a historically-oriented project about press coverage at specific places and times.

You cannot pass the class without doing all of the written work.

### **Writing assignments**

- Study questions. Periodically, I'll give you study questions to help you learn more from the reading. These won't be graded on content, but will be graded on completion, pass/fail.
- Two short papers (~1200 words), written during the semester, on assigned topics.
- Final exam: The final exam will be a set of essay questions. I'll give you a list of ten essay questions a few weeks before the exam. The learning happens when you prepare answers to all of them. On the day of the exam, I will pick three out of the ten, and you will write out your answers to those.

**Course grades:** determined by a mix of class participation, including study questions and section participation (10%), short papers (65%), and final exam (25%).

## **Reading Schedule**

### **Background**

The first assignment is a listening assignment, due before class even begins: Ezra Klein's podcast with Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-nehisi Coates on the 1619 project and backlash. Link and transcript [here](#).

**Sept 2** Introduction to our topics

**Sept 7** A brief history and political economy of US newspaper journalism

Schudson, 2020. *Journalism: Why it matters*

Abramson, 2019. *Merchants of Truth*, Chapters 3 and 9.

Rusbridger, 2018 *Breaking News*, excerpt from "The Gatekeepers"

Society for Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics

Recommended: Sullivan 2020. *Ghosting the News*

(Sullivan's book will be assigned as required reading later in the semester)

## **Part 1: Four visions of journalism and its political roles**

**Sept 9**      **Vision 1: Ida B. Wells-Barnett – Accountability journalism**

Wells-Barnett, 1892. [Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases](#).

Bey 2014, Introduction and Note on the Text *The Light of Truth: Writings of an anti-lynching crusader*.

Wells-Barnett, 1893. "The Requirements of Southern Journalism"

**Sept 14**

Wells-Barnett, 1917. [The East St. Louis Massacre: Greatest Outrage of the Century](#)

Goldsby, 2006. *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*. pages 42-49, 58-60, 64-71.

Recommended: Lawrie Balfour (2015), "Ida B. Wells and 'Color line justice': Rethinking reparations in feminist terms."

**Sept 16**      **How the press can shape historical narratives about political violence: 1980 Miami uprising**

Hinton, 2021. *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960's*. Chapter 8, "The System".

Recommended: Kerner Commission report, 1967. Chapter 15: The News Media and the Disorders. (NB: This segment is required reading for the week on the Apology movement).

**Sept 21**      **Vision 2: Walter Lippmann – Journalism as mediator of expertise**

Lippmann, 1925, *The Phantom Public*. Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 8

**Sept 23**      **How to abandon the ideal of omni-competent citizen**

Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Parts 7 and 8, “Newspapers” and “Organized Intelligence”  
Schudson, 2006. “Six or seven things news can do for democracy”

Recommended: Schudson, 2018 “Walter Lippmann’s ghost: an interview”

**Sept 28 Two Lippmann-esque lineages**

Achen and Bartels, 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Chapter 1.

Schudson 2006 “The trouble with experts and why democracy needs them”

**Sept 30 Vision 3: John Dewey – The public as news protagonist**

Dewey, 1927. *The Public and its Problems*. Chapters 1 and 2.

Rogers, 2016. “Revisiting *The Public and its Problems*”

**Oct 5 Dewey on the state vs. the public**

Dewey, 1927. *The Public and its Problems*, Chapter 4.

Dewey, 1939. *Freedom and Culture*, excerpt from “Human nature and culture”

Recommended:

Dewey, 1925. “Practical Democracy”. Review of Lippmann’s *The Phantom Public*.

**Oct 7 Democratic knowledge: people over propaganda?**

Allen and Pottle 2018. “Democratic knowledge and the problem of faction”

**Oct 12 Vision 4: Hannah Arendt – Traditional vs. organized lying**

Arendt, 1967. “Truth and Politics”

Recommended: Robichaud, “Facts aren’t enough to save democracy”

**Oct 14**

Arendt, 1967. “Truth and Politics”

Lasch, 1990. “The Lost Art of Political Argument”

Recommended: Wolin 2016, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political”

**Oct 19 Journalism and the varieties of political lying**

Rosen 2017. Send the interns.

Rosen 2016. Asymmetry between the major parties fries the circuits of the mainstream press

Stanley 2021. “Democratic Lies and Fascist Lies”

## **Part II: Problems, challenges and opportunities**

### **Oct 21 Leaks and Gatekeepers**

Shimer, 2020. *Rigged: a history of covert electoral interference*. Chapter 11

Snyder, 2018. *The road to unfreedom*, 228-235.

Sagar, 2016, *Secrets and Leaks*, Preface to new edition

Posner, 2013 Review of Sagar's *Secrets and Leaks*

Reitman, 2021. "I helped destroy people" NYT Magazine profile of Terry Albury, former FBI agent

Recommended:

Rusbridger 2018, *Breaking news*, chapter 22 "Do you love your country?"

Sagar 2013, *Secrets and Leaks*, Chapter 6, Conclusion

### **Oct 26 Guest speaker: Joe Sexton, investigative journalist**

Topic: What should count as news?

Dewey 1939, *Freedom and Culture*, excerpt from "Culture and Human Nature" (re-read)

Rosen 1992. "Politics, vision and the press: toward a public agenda for journalism"

Gillers, 2018 *Journalism Under Fire: Protecting the Future of Investigative Reporting*, Introduction.

### **Oct 28 Guest speaker: Jill Abramson, former Executive Editor of the New York Times, Professor of English, Harvard University**

Readings: Review readings about Leaks and Gatekeepers, and chapters 3 and 9 of Abramson's *Merchants of Truth*

### **Nov 2 Objectivity: method, tone, content, and other guises**

Schudson, 2018. "Is journalism a profession? Objectivity 1.0, 2.0 and beyond"

Kennedy, 2021. "A lawsuit against the Washington Post reignites the debate over objectivity"

Lowery, 2020. "A reckoning over objectivity, led by Black journalists"

Serwer, 2019. "The fight over the 1619 Project is not about the facts"

Mattar, 2020 "Objectivity is a privilege accorded to white journalists"

Recommended: Podcast [interview](#) with journalist and 2022 Nieman Fellow Pacinthe Mattar

### **Nov 4 The Apology movement**

Fannin, 2020. "The truth in Black and white", *Kansas City Star*

Adler, 2020. "Brutes' and murderers: Black people overlooked in KC coverage – except in crime" *Kansas City Star*

Los Angeles *Times* editorial board, 2020. "An examination of the *Times*' failures on race, our apology and a path forward"

Staples, 2021. "How the white press wrote off Black America"

Kerner Commission report, 1967. Chapter 15: The News Media and the Disorders.

**Nov 9            Framing, trust, and objectivity**

Malcolm 1990. "*The Journalist and the Murderer*. pages 3-9, 151-158.

Entmann 2007. "Framing bias: media and the distribution of power"

Pew Center 2021, Declining trust in media, plus the Poll Questions

**Nov 11           Election coverage: public journalism**

Rosen 1999. *What are Journalists For?* Chapter 1: "As Democracy Goes, So Goes the Press"

**Nov 16           The First Amendment in the age of social media**

Tim Wu, 2017. "Is the First Amendment obsolete?"

Gillers, 2018, *Journalism under Fire*. Chapter 2

**Nov 18           Political propaganda in social media**

Pomerantsev 2019. *This is not propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality*. Chapter 1, "Cities of Trolls".

Applebaum 2020. *Twilight of Democracy*, Chapter 4: "Cascades of Falsehood".

Applebaum and Pomerantsev 2021. "How to put out democracy's dumpster fire".

Donavan 2020 "Concrete recommendations for cutting through misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic"

**Nov 23           Disappearance of local news**

Margaret Sullivan, 2020. *Ghosting the News*

more TBD

**Nov 30**           <slack>

**Dec 2**            Conclusions