The Changing Dynamics of Public Controversies

Professor: Todd Gitlin  
Teaching Assistant: Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

This course aims to help the participants make better sense of how public controversies play out in today’s changing media environment. Recent years have seen an explosion in the number of platforms that allow publication (many commercial, some not), a decline in the relative importance of some of the traditional centers of publicity (network news and newspapers) and the professions formed around them (journalism). Simultaneously, the very material character of what is made public seems to be changing from the relative fixity of print and broadcast and the ephemeral character of face-to-face interaction in physical public spaces. Today, we face a profusion of eminently malleable and remixable but also oddly durable digital products that facilitate not only the transfer of information and its annotation, but also increasingly the development of communities and the pursuit of collective action both on- and off-line. Throughout the course, we will look at technological changes, novel organizational logics, and the emergence of new players and platforms, all tied together in various concrete examples of public controversy, whether political, financial, or cultural.

The starting proposition is that the dynamics of public controversies are undergoing a transformation partly propelled by the rise of the internet and what has been called the ‘network society’. We will explore how these changes play out. One multi-faceted case that we will scrutinize together is the ongoing controversy surrounding media regulation and reform in the United States, including debates over copyright, network neutrality, and regulation of the telecommunications industry. This particular debate illustrates many of the new phenomena and players involved, underlines the continued importance of heritage institutions, and also serves to highlight how today may be an important formative moment in media history, as new infrastructures, institutions and organizational populations, and social settings are forged even as they and their alternatives are subject to intense debate. In addition to the case of media reform, students are encouraged to bring their own substantial interests and cases of controversy in.

We will read mainly contemporary works from communication studies, sociology, science and technology studies, political science, and law that explore these emerging phenomena, and shall steer largely clear off debates surrounding the notion of a ‘public sphere’ that has dominated most academic discussion of public controversy in the last decades.

In the first part of the course (3 weeks), we will discuss various alternative concepts for making sense of the dynamics of public controversies, drawn from pragmatist social theory, science and technology studies, and recent legal scholarship. Since the extent and precise character of the changing dynamics are unclear, we will continue with an open-ended exploration of, in the second part (5 weeks), different macroscopic theories grappling with the situation at hand, and, in the third part (6 weeks), various trends that have been identified at more intermediary levels. Throughout the course, students will be asked to present on actual cases of public controversy that interest them.

*All participants will be invited to “The Changing Dynamics of Public Controversies”, a conference on February 6-7. Bruno Latour and Paul Starr will be amongst the speakers.*
Course requirements: The course will be taught as a seminar, and will be capped at 15 students. Participants should be prepared to participate in the ongoing conversations throughout the semester, contribute a short presentation on a controversy of their choice, and write a final paper of 20 to 30 pages. The paper can build on the presentation. Our goal is to find a topic and means of presentation that best suits your needs.

Readings: Books are available at Book Culture, 112th street between Amsterdam and Broadway. They are also on reserve in the Journalism Library, room 204 on the entry level. All of the articles are available through the Columbia Libraries website.

We will read substantial parts of the following books.


Course Outline (* indicates required readings)

1. Introduction

Please skim the following brief readings for background.


Further readings:


- - - Concepts (part I) - - -

2. Conceptualizing Public Controversies (pragmatism)


Further readings:


3. Conceptualizing Public Controversies (science and technology studies)


**Further readings:**


- - - Macrosopes (part II) - - -

4. The Rise of the Network Society and its Public


Further readings:


5. Denationalization and Rescaling of Public and Private Networks


6. The Networked Information Economy and its Public


Further readings:


7. Legal Debates over the New Infrastructures


Further readings:

Anything related to the Supreme Court’s Decision in Eldred v. Ashcroft, 537 U.S. 186.


8. Discussion session, catch-up, move on

No readings assigned this week.
9. Attention Economy and Overload


Further readings:


10. Fragmentation


Further readings:


11. New Connections?


*Further readings:*


**12. Changing forms of Professional Content Production (convergence journalism)**


*Further readings:*


**13. Emerging forms of Production (user-generated content, remix, hybrid organization)**


Further Readings:


14. Loser-Generated Content, or, the Pros and Cons of Free Labor


Further readings:


*First Monday*, Special Issue, Critical Perspectives on Web 2.0, Volume 13, Number 3 - 3 March 2008.

- - - End of Semester - - -

15. Final Session (catch up and discussion)

No readings assigned this week.