Course Description
Over the years, “Publics” has become a capacious framework to conceptualize wide ranging phenomena and practices: from mob behavior to crowdsourcing in social media, from televised debates to cinema-going spectators, from infrastructural failures to global pandemics, from celebrity scandals to environmental controversies that bring together affected communities. This course uses theories and ideas of public spheres, public cultures, issue-based publics, heterogeneous publics, and countercultures to explore case studies of such events and processes.

The study of publics has been an extremely productive area of research, with scholars examining and interpreting conversations happening in public arenas such as coffee houses and salons, forms of address to strangers that can be found in public speeches and performances, spread of rumor and news in society, formation of solidarities around a common concern, everyday practices that entangle humans and non-humans, and attempts to bolster democracies through public deliberations. The course engages with these different theoretical trajectories about publics in order to ask questions such as: How do we communicate and interact with each other in the digital media ecology? How does information circulate across various media through nodes and links consisting of humans and technologies? What political alternatives are available to population groups that never get a chance to debate policies, which impact their lives and livelihoods? Can publics include objects, human experiences, and animal affect, and if so, with what consequences? How are publics similar to and different from networks and assemblages? What is the role of media and mediation in expanding and/or contracting publics? How do social media help in assembling populations in public spaces? Do algorithms sustaining social media make visible particular publics and erase others from users’ attention? In what ways does a
public controversy gather stakeholders around it? How do public spaces of protest create transnational publics and strengthen social movements?

The course pays particular attention to feminist interventions that question public-private divides and advocate for studying intimate publics. Additionally, the course provides conceptual sensibilities to compare publics in the West with those emerging in non-Western postcolonial contexts of Africa and South Asia.

**Course assignments:**

In addition to regular participation in seminar discussions, each student will be expected to
i) Class Participation + Lead discussion of one assigned/selected reading (10%)
ii) Email one question, each week, based on the week’s reading to the entire class (10%)
iii) Write a paper proposal for the final/term paper (20%)
iv) deliver a “class presentation” (12 minutes), on a research topic you will pursue throughout the course to write the final/term paper [to be determined in consultation and discussion with the instructor and feedback on paper proposal] (10%)
v) write a final/term paper (3000 words) (50%)

[There are no textbooks for this course. All readings will be available as electronic pdfs on Canvas].

**Academic Code of Conduct**

University policy on Academic Dishonesty can be found here: [http://provost.upenn.edu/policies/pennbook/2013/02/13/code-of-academic-integrity](http://provost.upenn.edu/policies/pennbook/2013/02/13/code-of-academic-integrity)

Policy on Secular and Religious Holidays: Please refer to the university guidelines here: [http://provost.upenn.edu/policies/pennbook/2013/02/13/policy-on-secular-and-religious-holidays](http://provost.upenn.edu/policies/pennbook/2013/02/13/policy-on-secular-and-religious-holidays)

For students who wish to observe particular religious holidays, please let the instructor know in advance, so that necessary arrangements can be made related to rescheduling assignments and examinations.

**Attendance Policy:** Regular attendance is expected and students should let the instructor know in advance if they are planning to not attend a particular day of class. Attendance in class is directly related to class participation points.

**Week 1: Public Sphere and Public Spheres**

Calhoun, Craig, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”

Fraser, Nancy, “Rethinking the public sphere,” *Social Text*

Catherine Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” *Communication Theory*

Suggested Reading: Excerpts from Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the*
Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society

Week 2: Publics and Counterpublics

Charles Taylor, “The Public Sphere,” from Modern Social Imaginaries

Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” Public Culture

Screening: Clips from Partners in Crime (Paromita Vohra, 2011)

Week 3: Public Deliberation

Excerpts from Callon et al. Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy


Suggested Reading: Lisa Weeden, “The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen,” Public Culture

Week 4: “Public Sphere and Experience”

Excerpts from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere

Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, late cinema: permutations of the public sphere,” Screen


Screening: Clips from Germany in Autumn (Fassbinder, Kluge, and others, 1978)

Week 5

Issue-based Publics

Excerpts from John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems

Noortje Marres, “Issues spark a public into being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate.”

Week 6

Materiality of Publics

Jane Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages” and “Political Ecologies” from Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things

Noortje Marres, “Frontstaging Nonhumans: Publicity as a Constraint on the Political Activity of
Things”

Suggested Readings:

Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore “The Stuff of Politics: An Introduction,” In Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life

Excerpts from Bruno Latour, Politics of Nature: How to bring the Sciences into Democracy

Screening: In Free Fall (Hito Steyrl, 2010)

Week 7

Publics around Technologies and Infrastructures

Joseph Masco, “The Billboard Campaign: The Los Alamos Study Group and the Nuclear Public Sphere,” Public Culture

Daniel Mains, “Blackouts and Progress: Privatization, Infrastructure, and a Developmentalist State in Jimma, Ethiopia,” Cultural Anthropology

AbdouMaliq Simone, “Infrastructure: Introductory Commentary,” Cultural Anthropology, available:

Excerpts from Brian Larkin, Signal and Noise: Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria


Screening: Clips from The Land of Wandering Souls (Rithy Panh, 1999, 111 mins).

Week 8

Intimate/Affective Publics

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” Critical Enquiry

Excerpts from Lauren Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship

Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” Critical Enquiry

Nancy Fraser, “Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas”

From TIME magazine’s Archives: The Anita Hill Saga

Suggested Reading: William Mazzarella, “Obscene Tendencies: Censorship and the Public Punctum” from Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity
Screening: Clips from *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992).

**Week 9**

**Media(ted) Publics and Audiences**
Excerpts from Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross, *The Media and The Public: “Them” and “Us” in Media Discourse*

Chris Berry, *Shanghai’s Public Screen Culture: Local and Coeval*

Excerpts from Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*

Suggested Reading: Excerpts from David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*

*Paper Proposals due*

**Week 10**

**Networked and Algorithmic Publics**

Langlois and Elmer et al., *Networked Publics: The Double Articulation of Code and Politics on Facebook*

Tarleton Gillespie, “Can an Algorithm be Wrong?,” *LIMN*

Excerpts from Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*

Suggested Reading:

Jennifer Slack and John McGregor Wise, “Articulation and Assemblage” from *Culture + Technology: A Primer*

**Week 11**

**Biopolitics**

Michel Foucault, Ch. 11, “Lecture: 17 March, 1976,” *Society Must be Defended*

Giles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies”

Giorgio Agamben, “Form-of-Life” from *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*

Roberto Esposito, “Introduction,” from *Immunitas*

Timothy Mitchell, “Introduction to Roberto Esposito,” from *Bios*

Excerpts from Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*
Screening: Clips from *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011)

**Week 12**

**Governed Populations: Civil Society|Political Society**


Shiju Varughese, “Where are the missing masses? The Quasi-Publics and Non-Publics of Technoscience,” *Minerva*

Suggested Reading: *South Asian Cultures of the Bomb: Atomic Publics and the State in India and Pakistan*

Screening: Clips from *Jung Aur Aman* (Anand Patwardhan, 2002)

**Week 13**

**Social Media and Social Movements**

W. Lance Bennett, “Social Movements beyond Borders: Organization, Communication, and Political Capacity in Two Eras of Transnational Activism” in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*

Zizi Papacharissi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira, “Affective News and Networked Publics: The Rhythms of News Storytelling on #Egypt,” *Journal of Communication*

Thérèse F. Tierney, “Reappropriating Social Media: Internet Activism, Counterpublics, and Implications,” In: *The Public Space of Social Media: Connected Cultures of the Network Society*

Suggested:

Malcom Gladwell, “Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted?”

**Week 14**

**Public Spaces of Protest**

Simon Springer, “Public Space as Emancipation: Meditations on Anarchism, Radical Democracy, Neoliberalism and Violence,” *Antipode*

Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder, “*Occupying Wall Street: Places and Spaces of Political Action*,” *Places*.

Screening(s): *#18 days in Egypt* and Videos from OccupyWallStreet.

**Week 15: Student Presentations**

**Final/Term Papers Due**