

## Current Trends in Media Research

### *Graduate seminar at the New School for Social Research*

This course will cover some of the most pressing issues in media research in the early twenty-first century. Discussed topics include the increasing presence of artificial (un)intelligence in our daily lives, the digital transformation of journalism, the challenges journalists face in illiberal contexts, the racial biases of emerging technologies and the peculiar popularity of celebrities worldwide. Each week is dedicated to one central, media-related question of our times that we discuss through one book that was published in the last five years. In designing this course, I worked hard to present a diversity of authors, subfields, and methods, and also a variety of academic presses. Syllabus is subject to change given that some authors might zoom in and their schedules could change over the course of the semester.

**Instructor:** Julia Sonnevend, Associate Professor of Sociology and Communication, The New School for Social Research

**E-mail:** [jsonnevend@newschool.edu](mailto:jsonnevend@newschool.edu)

**Meeting times:** Tuesday, 1:55 pm – 3:45 pm on Zoom

**Office hours:** on Zoom, by appointment

#### **Graded course activities:**

Participation in class discussions (or other meaningful participation): 20 %

Questions posted to Canvas: 20 %

Presentation: 20 %

Final paper: 40 %

#### **Learning outcomes:**

Students will get a glimpse into current, ongoing research in media and journalism studies. Through discussions of books published in the last five years, they also gain some skills in academic publishing. Some book authors will zoom in, offering a chance for students to engage with leading media researchers.

#### **Requirements:**

##### **Participation:**

This seminar focuses on the in-depth discussion of books; active participation in our conversations is an important part of your grade. However, if due to the current pandemic circumstances you cannot participate in the synchronous meetings, you can substitute for them by submitting a two-page commentary of the readings assigned for the particular weeks. If you are unable to do so, please be in touch and I am sure we will find a solution. These are very difficult times for all of us: please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any concern you may have!

## **Questions:**

Each student is required to post **three questions** to Canvas about the readings of the particular week. Deadline for submitting questions is **24 hours before the start of the class**.

## **Presentation:**

Each student is required to give a presentation on one of the assigned books. Please send me your book preference by September 5, and I will do my best to assign books according to listed preferences.

## **Final paper:**

Each student is required to write a book review of a book that was written about the “media” (broadly defined) and has been published in the last five years. Paper has to summarize the key arguments of the book and provide an analysis of the arguments. Expected length: approximately 5 pages.

**Deadline: December 5, 2020.**

### **September 1 – Introduction**

### **September 8 – Why do so many people care so much about celebrities?**

**Reading:** Uploaded chapters from Sharon Marcus: *The Drama of Celebrity*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

“Why do so many people care so much about celebrities? Who decides who gets to be a star? What are the privileges and pleasures of fandom? Do celebrities ever deserve the outsized attention they receive? In this fascinating and deeply researched book, Sharon Marcus challenges everything you thought you knew about our obsession with fame. Icons are not merely famous for being famous; the media alone cannot make or break stars; fans are not simply passive dupes. Instead, journalists, the public, and celebrities themselves all compete, passionately and expertly, to shape the stories we tell about celebrities and fans. The result: a high-stakes drama as endless as it is unpredictable.

Drawing on scrapbooks, personal diaries, and vintage fan mail, Marcus traces celebrity culture back to its nineteenth-century roots, when people the world over found themselves captivated by celebrity chefs, bad-boy poets, and actors such as the “divine” Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), as famous in her day as the Beatles in theirs. Known in her youth for sleeping in a coffin, hailed in maturity as a woman of genius, Bernhardt became a global superstar thanks to savvy engagement with her era’s most innovative media and technologies: the popular press, commercial photography, and speedy new forms of travel. Whether you love celebrity culture or hate it, *The Drama of Celebrity* will change how you think about one of the most important phenomena of modern times.”

### **September 15 – Can artificial intelligence solve all/most social problems?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Meredith Broussard: *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. (MIT Press, 2019)

“In *Artificial Unintelligence*, Meredith Broussard argues that our collective enthusiasm for applying computer technology to every aspect of life has resulted in a tremendous amount of poorly designed systems. We are so eager to do everything digitally—hiring, driving, paying bills, even choosing romantic partners—that we have stopped demanding that our technology actually work. Broussard, a software developer and journalist, reminds us that there are fundamental limits to what we can (and should) do with technology. With this book, she offers a guide to understanding the inner workings and outer limits of technology—and issues a warning that we should never assume that computers always get things right.”

### **September 22 How can we moderate content on social media?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Sarah T. Roberts: *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. (Yale University Press, 2019)

“Social media on the internet can be a nightmarish place. A primary shield against hateful language, violent videos, and online cruelty uploaded by users is not an algorithm. It is people. Mostly invisible by design, more than 100,000 commercial content moderators evaluate posts on mainstream social media platforms: enforcing internal policies, training artificial intelligence systems, and actively screening and removing offensive material—sometimes thousands of items per day. Sarah T. Roberts, an award-winning social media scholar, offers the first extensive ethnographic study of the commercial content moderation industry. Based on interviews with workers from Silicon Valley to the Philippines, at boutique firms and at major social media companies, she contextualizes this hidden industry and examines the emotional toll it takes on its workers. This revealing investigation of the people “behind the screen” offers insights into not only the reality of our commercial internet but the future of globalized labor in the digital age.”

### **September 29 Does journalism still matter?**

**Reading:** Michael Schudson: *Journalism: Why It Matters* (Polity, 2020).

“Despite the criticisms that have been leveled at news organizations in recent years and the many difficulties they face, journalism matters. It matters, argues Schudson, because it orients people daily in the complex and changing worlds in which they live. It matters because it offers a fact-centered, documented approach to pertinent public issues. It matters because it keeps watch on the powerful, especially those in government, and can press upon them unpleasant truths to which they must respond. Corruption is stemmed, unwise initiatives stopped, public danger averted because of what journalists do. This book challenges journalists to think hard about what they really do. It challenges skeptical news audiences to be mindful not only of media bias but also of their own biases and how these can distort their perception. And it holds out hope that journalism will be for years to come a path for ambitious, curious young people who love words or pictures or numbers and want to use them to improve the public conversation in familiar ways or in ways yet to be imagined.”

### **October 6 How does a free press look like in the current political and technological environment?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Mike Ananny: *Networked Press Freedom: Creating Infrastructures for a Public Right to Hear* (MIT Press, 2018)

“In *Networked Press Freedom*, Mike Ananny offers a new way to think about freedom of the press in a time when media systems are in fundamental flux. Ananny challenges the idea that press freedom comes only from heroic, lone journalists who speak truth to power. Instead, drawing on journalism studies, institutional sociology, political theory, science and technology studies, and an analysis of ten years of journalism discourse about news and technology, he argues that press freedom emerges from social, technological, institutional, and normative forces that vie for power and fight for visions of democratic life. He shows how dominant, historical ideals of professionalized press freedom often mistook journalistic *freedom from* constraints for the public's *freedom to* encounter the rich mix of people and ideas that self-governance requires. Ananny's notion of press freedom ensures not only an individual right to speak, but also a public right to hear. Seeing press freedom as essential for democratic self-governance, Ananny explores what publics need, what kind of free press they should demand, and how today's press freedom emerges from intertwined collections of humans and machines. If someone says, “The public needs a free press,” Ananny urges us to ask in response, “What kind of public, what kind of freedom, and what kind of press?” Answering these questions shows what robust, self-governing publics need to demand of technologists and journalists alike.”

### **October 13 How can journalists operate in authoritarian and illiberal contexts?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Maria Repnikova: *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

“Who watches over the party-state? In this engaging analysis, Maria Repnikova reveals the webs of an uneasy partnership between critical journalists and the state in China. More than merely a passive mouthpiece or a dissident voice, the media in China also plays a critical oversight role, one more frequently associated with liberal democracies than with authoritarian systems. Chinese central officials cautiously endorse media supervision as a feedback mechanism, as journalists carve out space for critical reporting by positioning themselves as aiding the agenda of the central state. Drawing on rare access in the field, *Media Politics in China* examines the process of guarded improvisation that has defined this volatile partnership over the past decade on a routine basis and in the aftermath of major crisis events. Combined with a comparative analysis of media politics in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, the book highlights the distinctiveness of Chinese journalist-state relations, as well as the renewed pressures facing them in the Xi era.”

### **October 20 Can emerging technologies deepen social inequity?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Ruha Benjamin: *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity, 2019).

“From everyday apps to complex algorithms, Ruha Benjamin cuts through tech-industry hype to understand how emerging technologies can reinforce White supremacy and deepen social inequity. Benjamin argues that automation, far from being a sinister story of racist programmers scheming on the dark web, has the potential to hide, speed up, and deepen discrimination while appearing neutral and even benevolent when compared to the racism of a previous era. Presenting the concept of the “New Jim Code,” she shows how a range of discriminatory designs encode inequity by explicitly

amplifying racial hierarchies; by ignoring but thereby replicating social divisions; or by aiming to fix racial bias but ultimately doing quite the opposite. Moreover, she makes a compelling case for race itself as a kind of technology, designed to stratify and sanctify social injustice in the architecture of everyday life. This illuminating guide provides conceptual tools for decoding tech promises with sociologically informed skepticism. In doing so, it challenges us to question not only the technologies we are sold but also the ones we ourselves manufacture.”

### **October 27 Can technology “revolutionize” education?**

**Reading:** Uploaded chapters from Morgan G. Ames: *The Charisma Machine: The Life, Death, and Legacy of One Laptop per Child* (MIT Press, 2019).

“In *The Charisma Machine*, Morgan Ames chronicles the life and legacy of the One Laptop per Child project and explains why—despite its failures—the same utopian visions that inspired OLPC still motivate other projects trying to use technology to “disrupt” education and development. Announced in 2005 by MIT Media Lab cofounder Nicholas Negroponte, One Laptop per Child promised to transform the lives of children across the Global South with a small, sturdy, and cheap laptop computer, powered by a hand crank. In reality, the project fell short in many ways—starting with the hand crank, which never materialized. Yet the project remained charismatic to many who were captivated by its claims of access to educational opportunities previously out of reach. Behind its promises, OLPC, like many technology projects that make similarly grand claims, had a fundamentally flawed vision of who the computer was made for and what role technology should play in learning. Drawing on fifty years of history and a seven-month study of a model OLPC project in Paraguay, Ames reveals that the laptops were not only frustrating to use, easy to break, and hard to repair, they were designed for “technically precocious boys”—idealized younger versions of the developers themselves—rather than the children who were actually using them. *The Charisma Machine* offers a cautionary tale about the allure of technology hype and the problems that result when utopian dreams drive technology development.”

### **November 3 What is behind the success of Fox News?**

**Reading:** Reece Peck: *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class*. (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

“Fox Populism offers fresh insights into why the Fox News Channel has been both commercially successful and politically effective. Where existing explanations of Fox's appeal have stressed the network's conservative editorial slant, Reece Peck sheds light on the importance of style as a generative mode of ideology. The book traces the historical development of Fox's counter-elite news brand and reveals how its iconoclastic news style was crafted by fusing two class-based traditions of American public culture: one native to the politics in populism and one native to the news field in tabloid journalism. Using the network's coverage of the late-2000s economic crisis as the book's principal case study, Peck then shows how style is deployed as a political tool to frame news events. A close analysis of top-rated programs reveals how Fox hails its audience as 'the real Americans' and successfully represents narrow, conservative political demands as popular and universal.”

### **November 10 How do we use technologies to navigate our everyday lives?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Jeffrey Lane: *The Digital Street*. (Oxford University Press: 2019).

“The social impact of the Internet and new digital technologies is irrefutable, especially for adolescents. It is simply no longer possible to understand coming of age in the inner city without an appreciation of both the face-to-face and online relations that structure neighborhood life. *The Digital Street* is the first in-depth exploration of the ways digital social media is changing life in poor, minority communities. Based on five years of ethnographic observations, dozens of interviews, and analyses of social media content, Jeffrey Lane illustrates a new street world where social media transforms how young people experience neighborhood violence and poverty. Lane examines the online migration of the code of the street and its consequences, from encounters between boys and girls, to the relationship between the street and parents, schools, outreach workers, and the police. He reveals not only the risks youths face through surveillance or worsening violence, but also the opportunities digital social media use provides for mitigating danger. Granting access to this new world, Jeffrey Lane shows how age-old problems of living through poverty, especially gangs and violence, are experienced differently for the first generation of teenagers to come of age on the digital street.”

### **November 17 What becomes known and seen as a global media event?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Julia Sonnevend: *Stories Without Borders: The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Iconic Event*. (Oxford University Press, 2016)

“How do stories of particular events turn into global myths, while others fade away? What becomes known and seen as a global iconic event? In *Stories without Borders*, Julia Sonnevend considers the ways in which we recount and remember news stories of historic significance. Focusing on journalists covering the fall of the Berlin Wall and on subsequent retellings of the event in a variety of ways - from Legoland reenactments to slabs of the Berlin Wall installed in global cities - Sonnevend discusses how certain events become built up so that people in many parts of the world remember them for long periods of time. She argues that five dimensions determine the viability and longevity of international news events. First, a foundational narrative must be established with certain preconditions. Next, the established narrative becomes universalized and a mythical message developed. This message is then condensed and encapsulated in a simple phrase, a short narrative, and a recognizable visual scene. Counter-narratives emerge that reinterpret events and in turn facilitate their diffusion across multiple media platforms and changing social and political contexts. Sonnevend examines these five elements through the developments of November 9, 1989 - what came to be known as the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Stories Without Borders* concludes with a discussion of how global iconic events have an enduring effect on individuals and societies, pointing out that after common currencies, military alliances, and international courts have failed, stories may be all that we have to bring hope and unity.”

**November 24** – No class, Thanksgiving

### **December 1 What kinds of attacks women face online, and what can we do about them?**

**Reading:** uploaded chapters from Sarah Sobieraj: *Credible Threat: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy*. Oxford University Press: 2020.

“Greta Thunberg. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Anita Sarkeesian. Emma Gonzalez. When women are vocal about political and social issues, too-often they are flogged with attacks via social networking sites, comment sections, discussion boards, email, and direct message. Rather than targeting their ideas, the abuse targets their identities, pummeling them with rape threats, attacks on their appearance and presumed sexual behavior, and a cacophony of misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, and homophobic stereotypes and epithets. Like street harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace, digital harassment rejects women's implicit claims to be taken seriously as interlocutors, colleagues, and peers. Sarah Sobieraj shows that this online abuse is more than interpersonal bullying--it is a visceral response to the threat of equality in digital conversations and arenas that men would prefer to control. Thus identity-based attacks are particularly severe for those women who are seen as most out of line, such as those from racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups or who work in domains dominated by men, such as gaming, technology, politics, and sports. Feminists and women who don't conform to traditional gender norms are also frequently targeted. Drawing on interviews with over fifty women who have been on the receiving end of identity-based abuse online, *Credible Threat* explains why all of us should be concerned about the hostile climate women navigate online. This toxicity comes with economic, professional, and psychological costs for those targeted, but it also exacts societal-level costs that are rarely recognized: it erodes our civil liberties, diminishes our public discourse, thins the knowledge available to inform policy and electoral decision-making, and teaches all women that activism and public service are unappealing, high-risk endeavors to be avoided. Sobieraj traces these underexplored effects, showing that when identity-based attacks succeed in constraining women's use of digital publics, there are democratic consequences that cannot be ignored.”

**December 8** Brief presentations of student papers (maximum 5 minutes for each presentation)

**December 15** Closing discussions & virtual chocolate chip cookies