



**PHIL 446 - Current Issues in Political Philosophy:  
Social Epistemology and Democratic Theory in the Digital Age**

Term: Winter 2023  
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Course Schedule: Tuesday & Thursday 2:35-3:55  
Location: ENGTR 0060  
Office hours: Tuesdays 4:15-5:15pm & by appointments  
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**Course Description**

The Digital Age is the era in which data and digital technologies have weaved their way into all spheres of human life. In the Digital Age, it is no longer tenable to think that the “virtual” is separated from the “real world”. Our real-world practices have been refashioned by the Internet, social media, connected objects (the “Internet of Things”), artificial intelligence and Big Data. In this course, we will focus on some of the ethical, political and epistemic issues raised by recent progress in artificial intelligence (AI) and by the digital infosphere. More specifically, we will review how the new information and communication technologies impact the quality of our democratic life. The digital infosphere looms large in what democratic theorists call the “public sphere”. Most observers agree that we are going through an epistemic crisis, often called the “post-truth condition”. Discursive phenomena such as epistemic (or filter) bubbles, echo chambers, ideology and propaganda, fake news, gaslighting, conspiracy theories, extremism, hateful and hurtful speech are all too common online and they all contribute to what many see as the impoverishment of democratic deliberation and to political polarization. Our mind evolved in way that make us vulnerable to cognitive biases such as the confirmation bias and to phenomena such as groupthink, and it appears that our new epistemic environment heightens our cognitive frailties.

For many years, political philosophers made the case that democratic regimes should become more “deliberative” and that high stake political disagreements should be settled through the exchange of “public reasons” (Rawls). We will explore how this hope for an enlightened public engaging in rational and respectful discussion is faring in the Digital Age. In contrast to traditional epistemology, social epistemology starts from the premise that we are, as thinkers, believers, and knowers, always embedded in specific social contexts and in networks of relationships. With the philosopher Susan Hurley, we will approach rationality as an “ecological phenomenon...profoundly embedded and

dependent on one's environment". We will try to understand not only how the current epistemic crisis came about, but also how we can overcome it.

This course is at the crossroad of political philosophy, the ethics of technology and social/political epistemology. Although we will review how online platforms, powered by machine learning algorithms, contribute to our current epistemic and political crisis, no prior technical knowledge in artificial intelligence and information and communication technologies is required for taking this course.

### **Format**

The course will include lectures, oral presentations by students and discussion. The instructor will lecture on various themes in political philosophy and social epistemology, whereas the group discussions will focus the reading assignments. There is no textbook; all the readings will be available on MyCourses. The group discussions will start with a student presentation on the required reading. Students must have done the readings and seek to contribute to the group discussion.

Many of the readings will be drawn from these three volumes (available online via McGill Library)

#### *Political Epistemology*

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/political-epistemology-9780192893338?cc=ca&lang=en&>

#### *Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Political-Epistemology/Hannon-Ridder/p/book/9780367345907>

#### *Applied Epistemology*

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/applied-epistemology-9780198833659?lang=en&cc=us#>

#### *Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Applied-Epistemology/Coady-Chase/p/book/9780367733766>

### **Assessments**

1) 8 commentaries on the reading assignments. Commentaries must be submitted on MyCourses the day before the reading will be discussed in class at the latest. Length: 300 words (max). 20% (2.5 points each)

2) One oral presentation on a required reading (15-20 minutes) 15%.

3) Attendance and participation. 10%.

4) Commentary on Simone Chambers' lecture. Due date: February 24. 7.5%

5) Commentary on C.T. Nguyen's lecture. Due date: April 6. 7.5%

6) Term paper outline: Students must summarize the topic of their paper, outline its tentative logical structure, and include a briefly annotated bibliography. Due date: March 24. 10%

7) Term paper: Short argumentative essay. Students must defend a thesis or position on a question related to the topics addressed in the course. Word Limit: 1250 (excluding presentation page and bibliography). Evaluation criteria: (1) understanding of the issue, arguments and literature (15 points), (2) argumentative clarity and rigor (12.5 points), (3) bibliographical research and form (2.5 points). Due Date: April 19. 30%

Late submission of the assignments will be downgraded at a rate of 1 point (commentaries and outline) and 2 points (essay) per day. Requests for extensions will be considered only when substantiated by a doctor's note.

### Reading Schedule

	Date	Reading to do before class
Week 1 Thursday	January 5th	
Week 2	January 10th	
	January 12th	Elizabeth Anderson (2006). The Epistemology of Democracy. <i>Episteme</i> , 3, pp 8-22 doi:10.3366/epi.2006.3.1-2.8 *
Week 3	January 17th	

	Date	Reading to do before class
	January 19th	
Week 4	January 24th	Landemore, H��l��ne. "An Epistemic Argument for Democracy." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Riddler, 363-373. London: Routledge, 2021
	January 26th	Brennan, Jason. "In Defense of Epistocracy." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Riddler, 374-383. London: Routledge, 2021.
Week 5	January 31st	
	February 2nd	Hardwig, John. "Epistemic Dependence." <i>The Journal of Philosophy</i> 82, no. 7 (1985): 335-49. *
Week 6	February 7th	Quassim Cassam, "Epistemic Vices, Ideologies and False Consciousness", In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Riddler, 301-312. London: Routledge, 2021.

	Date	Reading to do before class
	February 9th	Axel Gelfert, "What is Fake News", In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 171-180. London: Routledge, 2021.
Week 7	February 14th	No class. Watch Simone Chambers' Jarislowsky Chair lecture
	February 16th	Dan Kahneman, "Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection", <i>Judgment and Decision Making</i> , Vol 8, No. 4, 2013, pp. 407-424. *
Week 8	February 21st	Lorraine Code, "Epistemic Responsibility", <i>The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice</i> , 2017, chap 8.

	Date	Reading to do before class
	February 23th	No class  Replaced by attendance to Harmut Rosa's Jarislowsky Lecture, "Resonance, Acceleration and Alienation: The Desire for Control and The Uncontrollability of the World", Feb 24, 2023, 3:30pm.
<u>Spring Break</u>	February 28th	No class
<u>Spring Break</u>	March 2nd	No class
Week 9	March 7th	
	March 9th	Chambers S. Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere? <i>Political Studies</i> . 2021;69(1):147-163. *

	Date	Reading to do before class
Week 10	March 14th	
	March 16th	Nguyen, C.T. (2020). ECHO CHAMBERS AND EPISTEMIC BUBBLES. <i>Episteme</i> , 17(2), 141-161. *
Week 11	March 21st	David Coady, “Psychology and Conspiracy Theories”, <i>Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology</i> , 2019, Chapter 13.
	March 23rd	M.R.X. Dentith & B. Keeley, “The Applied Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories”, <i>Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology</i> , 2019, Chapter 21.
Week 12	March 28th	C. Thi Nguyen, “How Twitter Gamifies Communication”, <i>Applied Epistemology</i> , J. Lackey, Oxford University Press, 2021, chap 17. *

	Date	Reading to do before class
	March 30th	No class. Attendance to C.T. Nguyen's Annual Lin Centre Lecture
Week 13	April 4th	Étienne Brown, "Regulating the Spread of Online Misinformation", <i>Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , Chap 19.
	April 6th	Alex Worsnip, "The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media", <a href="https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/199235306.pdf">https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/199235306.pdf</a> *



	Date	Reading to do before class
	April 11th	A. Kozyreva et al., "Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens", <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 2022, p. 1-8.

### Varia

I tend to think that all electronic devices should be stored away during class, but they are permitted insofar as their use does not disrupt the teaching and learning process. Here is an interesting NPR report on the subject:

<https://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>

Please do not record the lectures.

The University requires that the following notices appear on every syllabus:

- McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).
- In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.
- In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.