



**PHIL 446 - Current Issues in Political Philosophy:  
Political Philosophy in the Digital Age**

***\* Note: a revised and updated version will be available before the beginning of the Fall 2022 Term***

Term: Winter 2022

Instructor: Professor Jocelyn Maclure

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Course Schedule: Tuesday & Thursday 11:35-12:55

Location: Zoom or Trottier Building # 0070

Office hours: TBA and on appointment

Teaching Assistant: Keven Bisson, [keven.bisson@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:keven.bisson@mail.mcgill.ca)

**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 legal 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, political polarization, ideology and propaganda, fake news, conspiracy theories, hateful and hurtful speech are all too common online and they all contribute to what many see as the impoverishment of the democratic conversation. 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 sphere is faring in the Digital Age. It is also widely acknowledged that AI, Big Data and online platforms are making it harder both to protect privacy and to regulate the exercise of freedom of expression. We will discuss whether new restrictions on the access to our personal data and on freedom of speech on social media can contribute to the resolution of our current epistemic and political crisis.

This course is at the crossroad of political philosophy, AI ethics 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 both lectures and seminar-like discussions in class. The instructor will lecture on various themes in political philosophy and related fields (ethics, social and political epistemology, philosophy of law), 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. Guest lecturers will be invited to present their views.

Many of the **readings** will be drawn from these two books (available online via McGill Library)

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

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

### **Assessments**

- 1) Five 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: 500 words (max). 20% (4 points each)
- 2) One oral presentation (15 minutes) 15%.
- 3) Attendance and participation in the group discussions. 10% : attendance 7 points maximum; participation 3 points maximum. 1 point lost for every unmotivated absence (max 7 points).
- 4) Commentary on Simone Chambers' lecture. Due date: TBA . 5%
- 5) 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 25<sup>th</sup>. 10%

6) Term paper: Students must defend a thesis or position on a question related to the topics addressed in the course. Word Limit: 2700 (excluding presentation page and bibliography). Evaluation criteria: (1) understanding of the issue, arguments and literature (20 points), (2) argumentative clarity and rigor (20 points), (3) bibliographical research and form (5 points). Due Date: April 19<sup>th</sup>. 40%

Late submission of the assignments will be downgraded at a rate of 2 points (not 2%) per day, including weekend/holiday days. Requests for extensions will be considered only when substantiated by a doctor's note or justified by exceptional personal circumstances.

### Reading Schedule

	Date	Reading to do before class
Week 1	January 6th	
Week 2	January 11th	
	January 13th	Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (2000). Why Deliberative Democracy is Different. <i>Social Philosophy and Policy</i> , 17(1), 161-180.
Week 3	January 18th	
	January 20th	Elizabeth Anderson (2006). The Epistemology of Democracy. <i>Episteme</i> , 3, pp 8-22 doi:10.3366/epi.2006.3.1-2.8

	Date	Reading to do before class
Week 4	January 25th	Landemore, H�el�ene. "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 27th	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	February 1st	Hardwig, John. "Epistemic Dependence." <i>The Journal of Philosophy</i> 82, no. 7 (1985): 335-49.
	February 3rd	S. Chambers, "Balancing Epistemic Quality and Equal Participation in a Systems Approach to Deliberative Democracy." <i>Social Epistemology</i> 31(2017) 3: 266-276
Week 6	February 8th	Brown, �tienne (forthcoming). Free Speech and the Legal Prohibition of Fake News. <i>Social Theory and Practice</i> .
	February 10th	Guest lecture : �tienne Brown, San Jose State University

	Date	Reading to do before class
Week 7	February 15th	
	February 17th	Nguyen, C. (2020). ECHO CHAMBERS AND EPISTEMIC BUBBLES. <i>Episteme</i> , 17(2), 141-161.
Week 8	February 22nd	Singer, Daniel J., Patrick Grim, Aaron Bramson, Bennett Holman, Jiin Jung, and William J. Berger. "Epistemic Networks and Polarization." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Riddler, 133-144. London: Routledge, 2021.

	Date	Reading to do before class
	February 24th	Levy, Neil L. and Robert M. Ross. "The Cognitive Science of Fake News." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 181-191. London: Routledge, 2021.
Reading Break	March 1st	No class
	March 3rd	No class
Week 9	March 8th	Cassam, Quassim. <i>Conspiracy Theories</i> . PDF file. <a href="https://0a55b417-ce72-4834-a5be-01aae3fd75a2.filesusr.com/ugd/b9abff_905a4c3288764bd0be80dfaffccc71d0.pdf">https://0a55b417-ce72-4834-a5be-01aae3fd75a2.filesusr.com/ugd/b9abff_905a4c3288764bd0be80dfaffccc71d0.pdf</a>

	Date	Reading to do before class
	March 10th	
Week 10	March 15th	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.
	March 17th	<b>No Class</b>  March 18 <sup>th</sup> , 3:30 pm, Jarislowsky Lecture Series in Human Nature and Technology  Simone Chambers, “Wrecking the Public Sphere: new-authoritarians and the digital attack on pluralism and truth”
Week 11	March 22nd	Stanovich, Keith E. “The Irrational Attempt to Impute Irrationality to One’s Political Opponents.” In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 274-284. London: Routledge, 2021.
	March 24th	Edenberg, Elizabeth. “The Problem with Disagreement on Social Media: Moral not Epistemic.” In <i>Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon, 259-279. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
Week 12	March 29th	Alfano, Mark and Emily Sullivan. “Online Trust and Distrust.” In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 480-491. London: Routledge, 2021.

	Date	Reading to do before class
	March 31st	Battaly, Heather. "Engaging Closed-mindedly with your Polluted Media Feed." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 312-324. London: Routledge, 2021.
Week 13	April 5th	Boult, Cameron. "The Epistemic Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 407-418. London: Routledge, 2021.
	April 7th	Tanesini, Alessandra. "Virtues and Vices in Public and Political Debate." In <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> , edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 325-335. London: Routledge, 2021.

## McGill's policies and recommendations related to COVID-19

This course includes in-person teaching, and learning activities have been planned in accordance with public health directives and McGill's protocols. It is important, however, to ensure you have read and abide by the following:

- Please review and follow the [Health Guidelines for Students](#), and it is imperative that you understand when to stay home if, for example, you are [experiencing COVID-19 symptoms](#).
- If you develop COVID-19 symptoms while on campus, please follow the [required guidelines](#), which include ensuring you have a mask on, isolate in a closed, private room, immediately call 1-877-644-4545 (Info-Santé) for instructions, and notify the University by calling 514-398-3000.
- **Masks are required in classroom and teaching lab settings**, at all times, and masks will be available for you on campus. Masks are also to be worn when entering and circulating in buildings and classrooms.
- If you are in a situation that might require you to miss some lectures or assignments because of short-term absences due to COVID-19, you are to request an academic accommodation using the online form found under the "Personal" menu in MINERVA; the form is called "**COVID-19 Academic Accommodations Request Form**". You are asked to use this form instead of requesting accommodations directly from your instructor.

Finally, the context of attending University during a pandemic will bring on additional stress and may impact your wellbeing. Please do not hesitate to reach out for support if necessary, and access the many resources available, including [Student Services](#), the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), and your Faculty's Student Affairs Office.

### 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.