CVS 0151-01: Civic Knowledge: How We Know Things

Professor Sam Fried

Mondays, 9-11:30am in Barnum 100

Office Hours: by appointment through https://samantha-fried.youcanbook.me/

Reading Hours: Tuesdays, 8:30-10am

Course Summary

In this course, we will explore the relationship between knowledge and democracy. We will do this through readings and discussion, and also through action: a collaboration with a Tisch College community partner, the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS). Our goal is to better understand what makes something knowledge and why, and how to engage that knowledge beyond the university, in practice.

We will explore questions like: What makes something a fact? How is valid knowledge created? Is science distinct from other ways of knowing and, if so, how? What's the relationship between theory and practice? What's the ideal role for stories and narratives in the communication of knowledge? What does it mean to stretch the truth?

Course Objectives

Together, we will:

Approach academic articles, even dense ones, with more confidence. This includes learning how to take notes and annotate while we read, such that we all get the most out of each chapter, article, or book.

Analyze information at the meta level. When we encounter videos, shows, movies, infographics, popular articles, TikToks, Instagram stories, and scholarly work – inside and outside of this course, we might ask ourselves questions like:

- Who is the author? And what societal factors motivated them to write/create this?
- What are the author's incentives for writing this?
- Who are the intended audiences for this work? And why?

- What need or gap does this work fulfill once it's out in the world?
- If there are any dogmatic or polarized communities organized around (or in opposition to!) this work, who are they? And what motivates them?
- We will investigate multiple sides of an issue, and grapple with the existence of conflicting information. To be clear, this is not about claiming that everything is relative, or that all sides of an issue are valid (though sometimes they might be). This is about really digging into the complexities and plurality of information controversies.

Through this course, we will sometimes engage opposition and controversy. And when we do, we'll aim to approach controversy with more curiosity than fire. This does not always look like understanding. It can also look like: deep reading, question-asking, following a series of citations, reading about an author's (or opposing author's) experiences and views. Sometimes, it also looks like throwing in the towel for the day and taking a nap.

The point is that hot takes are everywhere. And sure, they're fun sometimes. But they are not rigorous. Additionally, we can think of hot takes as a kind of tactic – usually, as part of a larger, intentional and manipulative strategy for gathering and disseminating information. We'll treat hot takes as a phenomenon in their own right – and if and when we have one, we'll name it!

We will co-create some knowledge with the Community Organizing team at the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS). We will work with community organizers, educators, and analysts at CAAS to create and mobilize some facts. Through this process, we'll do a lot of listening, and we will formulate questions that seek a holistic understanding of people and places.

Finally, we will all – your professor included – start developing our own particular set of commitments as they pertain to knowing: what do we think knowledge is, what do we think it means to create knowledge responsibly, and what do we think is the ideal role for learning and knowledge in our society? We develop these commitments when we engage in the course fully (readings, assignments, listening to your classmates and participating in discussion, etc.). Developing these commitments is also a lifelong process, and the end of this course is just the beginning of a lifelong reflective practice around knowledge. It never ends!

Schedule of Meetings, Readings, and Assignments

Week 1: Wednesday, January 21st

Welcome and Intro

Week 2: Monday, January 26th

Facts, and Discernment About Them

What does valuable knowledge look like, and how do we responsibly use that knowledge for good? This is a big question with no easy answers (keeping in mind that there are many definitions of *good*). The purpose of asking it is to begin an investigation that will continue for the rest of the course.

Readings for class:

- Levine, P. (2013). "How to Think About Politics: Values, Facts, and Strategies." In *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*, (pgs. 23-34). Oxford University Press.
- hooks, b. (2013). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*.
    - Chapter 1: Critical Thinking
    - Chapter 2: Democratic Education
- Dewey , J. (1910). "Judgment: The Interpretation of Facts." In *How We Think* (pgs. 101–115). D C Heath.

Week 3: Monday February 2nd

Viewpoints and Knowledge

How does a perspective or a standpoint inflect someone's way of knowing? When is it productive to think about knowledge as coming from a particular perspective or social location? What are the risks and rewards associated with these frameworks?

Readings for class:

- Táíwò, O. (2020). "Being-in-the-room privilege: Elite capture and epistemic deference." *The Philosopher, 108*(4), 61-70. https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference
- Haraway , D. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, 14

- Levine, P. (2024). People Are Not Points in Space: Network Models of Beliefs and Discussions. Critical Review, 36(1-2), 119-145.

Week 4: Monday, February 9th

Local Knowledge and a Slideshow About Somerville

The Director of Community Organizing at CAAS will visit us in Barnum 100 and talk about Somerville. While you're reading and touring, keep the following questions in mind: What's valuable about local knowledge? What about our tour could you not learn in a text book or from traditional readings, and why? How is local knowledge significant to what we've been learning so far about facts (and significant to the processes by which facts are created and validated)?

Readings for class:

- Dempsey, K. (nd). Erased: Gentrification comes to the playground.
- Vrabel, J. (2014). A People's History of the New Boston. University of Massachusetts Press.
    - CH 1, "The Old Boston and the New Boston": pgs. 5-9
    - CH 2, "To Hell with Urban Renewal": pgs. 10-33
    - CH 3, "Community Organizers and Advocacy Planners": pgs. 34-38
    - CH 9, "The Illusion of Inclusion and Assault by Acronyms": pgs. 92-100
    - CH 18, "The Battle over Busing": pgs. 169-187
- Yglesias, M. (2021, September 20). The hollowing out of Somerville. Slow Boring. https://www.slowboring.com/p/the-hollowing-out-of-somerville

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Week 5: Thursday, February 19th

Knowledge and Social Science, with Elena Sobrino

What is social science? And more specifically, what is ethnography? What is involved in creating knowledge via ethnographic study, and what is an ethnographer's responsibility re: attention, observation, and storytelling? How are field notes a kind of data, and what does it look like to create and archive them responsibly? What are the limitations of ethnography, and of social science writ large?

Readings for class:

- Key , K., Calvin, K., Jordan, T., Sneed, R. S., Bailey , R. S., Jefferson, B. B., … & Johnson-Lawrence, V. (2023). Examining community engagement research strategies used in Flint, Michigan: The church challenge. Progress in community health partnerships: research, education, and action, 17(2), 265-276.
- Lederman, R. (2016). Archiving fieldnotes? Placing 'anthropological records' among plural digital worlds. eFieldnotes. The makings of anthropology in the digital world, 251-271.
- Lorde, A. (1985). Poetry is not a luxury. The Broadview anthology of expository prose, 217-220.
- Durkheim, E. (1982). What is a social fact? In The Rules of Sociological Method: And selected texts on sociology and its method (pp. 50-59). London: Macmillan Education UK.

  OPTIONAL:

- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2014). Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory. Current Anthropology , 55(S9), S147–S153. https://doi.org/10.1086/676646

Week 6: Monday, February 23rd

Local Knowledge, Part II: Expertise and Visiting CAAS

Who are "laypeople," who are "experts," and how do we responsibly blur the distinction between the two through our work together? What is the best way for us to think about the relationship between research, knowledge, and action as we continue our work with CAAS? How do we responsibly weave local knowledge about Somerville together with the (more) global kinds of knowledge we're encountering in many of our readings? What is the difference between knowledge and advocacy?

Readings for class:

- Wynne, B. (1989). Sheepfarming after Chernobyl: A case study in communicating scientific information. Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development, 31(2), 10-39.
- Goldman, A. I. (2001). Experts: Which ones should you trust?. Philosophy and phenomenological research, 63(1), 85-110.
- Community Action Agency of Somerville. (2023, September 29). CAAS 2024-2026 Community Assessment Report, 1-87.

Week 7: Monday, March 2nd

Theory vs. Practice and Community Engagement, with Noel Reyes and Elaine Donnelly

What are the relationships between theory and practice? And why do universities often treat the two as separate? We'll read pieces dissecting the nature of the relationship between theory and practice, from authors in fields that are not usually in conversation with each other. Then, we'll have a conversation with two experts on community-university partnerships and community-engaged research.

Readings for class:

- Popper, K. (1935). :A Survey of Some Fundamental Problems." In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (pgs. 27-48). Routledge.
  Note: read through pg. 40: the first section, "The Problem of Induction," through the sixth section, "Falsifiability as a Criterion of Demarcation."
- Putnam, H. (2003). "The 'Corroboration' of Theories." In A. Bird and J. Ladyman (Eds.), *Arguing About Science* (pgs. 228-242). Routledge.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass." In *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (pgs. 156-166). Milkweed Editions.

Week 8: Monday, March 9th

Knowledge and Science

What does it mean to think scientifically about something, in the broadest sense? When is scientific knowledge the best kind of knowledge? What are the limitations of scientific knowledge – what can't it explain or account for? And how is scientific knowledge – and, more broadly, any kind of formalized knowledge – a social process?

Readings for class:

- Von Hayek, F. A. (1975). *The Pretense of Knowledge*. The Swedish Journal of Economics, 77(4), 433-442.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
  - Chapter 2: The Route to Normal Science (10-22).
  - Chapter 3: The Nature of Normal Science (23-34).

- Lackey , J. (2016). “What is justified group belief?” *Philosophical Review, 125*(3), 341-396.
  Note: Read only pgs. 341-357 (through section 4), and 379-393.

Week 9: Monday, March 23rd

BS and a Lost Regard for the Truth

How does Frankfurt define *bullshit*? What is the difference between BS and outright lying, according to Frankfurt? And how can we extend Frankfurt’s arguments about what it means to lose regard for truth (and for falsehoods in relation to the truth) to what we’ve learned so far about knowledge and narrative?

Readings for class:

- Frankfurt, H. (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press.
- McCarthy, H. (Host). (2022, September 6). Disinformation and Misinformation [Audio podcast episode]. In *Civics 101*. New Hampshire Public Radio.

Week 10: Monday, March 30th

Disinformation and Fake News, with James J. Fisher

What is disinformation? What is fake news? And how are these two phenomena related? This week, we’ll think about how disinformation and fake news are both local and global phenomena: issues that are not limited to one location or political position. Given this, what does an ideal approach to media literacy look like across space and time? Is it possible for media literacy efforts to take on a bottom-up approach, meeting people where they’re at? If so, what would that look like?

Readings for class:

- Arif, A., Stewart, L. G., & Starbird, K. (2018). “Acting the part: Examining information operations within #BlackLivesMatter discourse.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-computer Interaction, 2*(CSCW), 1-27.
- Kirwin, M., Ouedraogo, L., & Warner, J. (2022). “Fake news in the Sahel: ‘Afrancaux News,’ French counterterrorism, and the logics of user-generated media.” *African Studies Review, 65*(4), 911-938.
- Fisher, J.J. (2023, July 21). “Fake news is still a problem. International experience shows how a robust public education program on media literacy could help.” *The*

London School of Economics Blog. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2023/07/21/fake-news-is-still-a-problem-international-experience-shows-how-a-robust-public-education-program-on-media-literacy-could-help/

Week 11: Monday, April 6th

Knowledge and Narrative

By this point in the course, we'll have read a fair amount of work that is critical of narrative and storytelling. This week we'll ask ourselves: which aspects of storytelling are valuable and important? Which do we want to leave behind, and which do we want to employ across different contexts?

Readings for class:

- Latour, B. (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press.
    - Chapter 1: Crisis (pgs. 1-10).
    - Chapter 2: Constitution (pgs. 13-48) – we will ONLY read through pg. 28!
- Lasch, C. (2002). "Characteristics of Bad Writing." In *Plain Style*, pgs. 75-92. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- West, S. (Host). (2022, August 20). Bruno Latour – We Have Never Been Modern (No. 169). [Audio podcast episode]. In *Philosophize This!*

Week 12: Monday, April 13th

The Fragmentation of Knowledge and Relationships

We've thought a lot about both knowledge and relationship-building this semester. What do we think is the most ideal configuration of "knowledge" and "relationship-building" – and how do we define those two concepts, for our purposes? How is the current atomization, even fragmentation, of people related to a fragmentation of knowledge, and vice versa? And while there are no easy answers: what is our work going forward?

Readings for class:

- Ressa, M. (2022). *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future*. Harper Collins.
    - Prologue: The Invisible Atom Bomb

    - Chapter 7: How Friends of Friends Brought Democracy Down: Think Slow, Not Fast
- Wallace, D.F. (1997). “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” In *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (151-193). Little, Brown and Company.
- Mirowski, P. (2011). “Has Science Been ‘Harmed’ by the Modern Commercial Regime?” In *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science* (pgs. 259-314). Harvard University Press.

Week 13: Monday, April 27th Final Projects

TBA

Teaching and Learning Values Statement

Learning is a process, and intellect is too. Grifters are able to manipulate people not (just) because people can be foolish or uncareful, but because it is comforting to feel as though intellect is a product; that someone arrives at all of the best answers one day. And who doesn't want to be comfortable?! But no one has all of the answers, and anyone who leads you to believe that they do is playing a trick on you. My role as your instructor is not to trick you into thinking I am a supreme being who has all of the answers, but to provide a space for you to think in a disciplined and empowering way.

My classroom is, above all, about process. Process means: holding oneself accountable for reading, thinking, and participation; it means asking questions that are generous and critical; it means having sincere and engaged conversations; it means trying to learn as much as one can, and realizing that learning everything is impossible. With that said, there is something to be said for expertise and the value of it, particularly when it comes to being a discerning reader, writer, and communicator–it takes real, concerted discipline and practice to be those things. Expertise takes work.

AI Statement

This seminar is interdisciplinary, but its ethos is primarily rooted in the humanities. This means that we learn through intensive readings of complex texts, intensive discussion of those readings with peers, and writing – our *own* writing – in response. Extensive research shows that "deep reading" has educational and spiritual benefits (see: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-maryanne-wolf.html) ,

while substituting AI summaries for reading causes substantial brain decay (see: https://arxiv.org/pdf/2506.08872).

While there are some tools by which instructors can detect the use of AI and penalize it, I don't believe in using those tools: mainly because I think they are a form of surveillance that is unfair to you. I have some ways of knowing, without surveilling you, whether you've used AI to complete your assignments in a way that hinders your learning. And I may bring this up with you if I notice it. However, it is your responsibility to learn in college, and you will not learn if you substitute AI tools for reading and writing.

That said, I do not object to querying large language models (LLMs) for additional information and insights about the assigned texts and topics; using AI tools to translate texts that would otherwise be inaccessible to you; or even writing papers in your native language and using an AI tool to translate your work into English. I welcome further discussion of whether and how to use AI.

(Note that I have borrowed this statement from Professor Peter Levine and have adapted it slightly to fit the context of this course.)

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Tufts University values the diversity of our students, staff, and faculty and recognizes the important contribution each student makes to our unique community. Tufts is committed to providing equal access and support to all qualified students through the provision of reasonable accommodations so that each student may fully participate in the Tufts experience. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations, please contact the StAAR Center (formerly Student Accessibility Services) at StaarCenter@tufts.edu (mailto:StaarCenter@tufts.edu) or 617-627-4539 to make an appointment with an accessibility representative to determine appropriate accommodations. Please be aware that accommodations cannot be enacted retroactively, making timeliness a critical aspect for their provision.

Academic Support at the StAAR Center

The StAAR Center (formerly the Academic Resource Center and Student Accessibility Services) offers a variety of resources to all students (both undergraduate and graduate) in the Schools of Arts and Science, Engineering, the SMFA and Fletcher; services are free to all enrolled students. Students may make an appointment to work on any writing-related project or assignment, attend subject tutoring in a variety of disciplines, or meet with an academic coach to hone fundamental academic skills like time management or overcoming procrastination. Students can make an appointment for any of these services by visiting the StAAR Center (https://go.tufts.edu/StAARcenter) website.

Mental Health Support

As a student, there may be times when personal stressors or emotional difficulties interfere with your academic performance or well-being. The Counseling and Mental Health Service (CMHS) provides confidential consultation, brief counseling, and urgent care at no cost for all Tufts undergraduates as well as for graduate students who have paid the student health fee. To make an appointment, call 617-627-3360. Please visit the CMHS (https://go.tufts.edu/Counseling) website to learn more about their services and resources.