

SOU33171 — Democracy and the Public Sphere

Module Information	
Module Code	SOU33171
Module Title	Democracy and the Public Sphere
Department	Sociology
Year Group	Junior Sophister
Module Personnel	Dr Roderick Condon
Academic Year	2026-27
Credit Weighting	5 credits
Semester	Semester 1
Contact Hours	2 lectures + 1 tutorial per week

Module Content	
Module Description	This module examines the public sphere as a central institution of democratic society, exploring public communication and deliberation as the medium of societal self-reflection and transformation. It brings together literature from the fields of democratic and political theory, sociology, media studies and communications research to introduce students to the social theory of the public sphere and social research on public communication. The module aims to survey how media, politics, and civil society shape public debate, participation, and power with a view towards unpacking the contemporary 'crisis of democracy' through a critical analysis of its symptoms and causes. In this regard, it explores important questions concerning: capitalism, democracy, and the state; crisis; the mass media and politics; national and transnational public spheres; subaltern/counterpublics, multiple publics, and social movements; digital public spheres and pathologies of opinion formation; contemporary forms of democratic backsliding and authoritarian populism; and, the future of democracy and the public sphere.
Learning Outcomes	By the end of the module, students should be able to: Understand and explain the theory of the public sphere with knowledge of its central debates

Module Content

	• Critically assess the process of public opinion formation with a view consideration for how it is influenced and distorted by social power • Critically analyse the contemporary transformation of the public sphere from analogue/traditional to digital/new media • Connect and apply the reviewed theory and research in evaluating the contemporary crisis of democracy
Indicative Reading / Resources	• Chambers, S. (2023) <i>Contemporary Democratic Theory</i>. Cambridge: Polity. • Fraser, N. et al., Nash, K. (ed) (2014) <i>Transnationalizing the Public Sphere</i>. Cambridge: Polity. • Habermas, J. (1989) <i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society</i>. Cambridge: Polity. • Habermas, J. (2023) <i>A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics</i>. Cambridge: Polity.

Assessment

Assessment Components	• Presentation (20%) • Midterm assignment (30%) • End of term assignment (50%)
Assessment Details	

Additional Information

Prerequisites	None
Co-requisites	None
Any other information	