

Number of ECTS credits : 2

Course language : Anglais

Course leader : MARTINE Thomas

≡ COURSE DESCRIPTION

How do we make the difference between fake news and sturdy journalism? To what extent is objectivity in journalism different from objectivity in natural sciences? What are the hallmarks of objectivity and how can we assess it? In a business environment where information flows extremely fast, these questions are critical to risk management. To address them, this course will introduce you to contemporary approaches in the fields of media studies and science studies. You will be invited to debate the merits of various theories of objectivity, analyse recent news articles and participate in an ongoing research project that develops a new objectivity assessment technique.

≡ COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Present the main criticisms that have been addressed to journalistic objectivity as well as the limits of these criticisms;
- Show the merits of evaluating objectivity in terms of degrees (thanks to the notion of “chain of reference”);
- Map out and critically assess the elements of evidence that support news items.

≡ LEARNING GOALS

LG01 - Analysis : Make use of critical analysis/critical thinking skills

LG04 - Action : Make proposals, take initiatives

≡ TACKLED CONCEPTS

Journalistic objectivity
Objectivity as a strategic ritual
Chain of reference

≡ LEARNING METHODS

This course uses three complementary teaching methods:

1. Cycles of readings and debates: Before some of the classes, you will have to read one or two mandatory texts and write a comment about them (see “comments on the readings” below). This assignment will help you to familiarize yourself with key concepts of the course and engage in active reflection about them. This will allow us to start the classes by debating the merits of both the texts and your reflections about them.
2. Cycles of lectures and practical exercises: After the debates, the classes will continue with short lectures during which the professor will connect the key concepts of the readings and present concrete illustrations. These lectures will then be completed with short practical exercises (e.g. case studies, group discussions, oral presentations) that allow you to test and deepen your understanding of the concepts.
3. Teamwork assignment (see instructions below): during this assignment, you will be invited to collectively map out the body of evidence that supports a news text and orally present your findings. This activity will allow you to connect the various concepts and tools of the course by applying them to a concrete example. It will also help you strengthen your organization and cooperation skills.

≡ ASSIGNMENTS

Comments on the readings

- Instructions: a comment is a short text (400 words) in which you present an argued reflection about the reading. The purpose is not to summarize the reading, but to discuss the merits of one of its key concepts by connecting it to issues and concepts that are developed in other texts (i.e. scientific articles, scholarly books, newspaper articles, etc.).
- Calendar: You will have to make three comments. To be validated, your comments must be sent to me via Blackboard at the latest two days before the class during which the reading will be discussed. This period will allow me to use your comments to prepare the class.
- Evaluation criteria: (a) capacity to summarize a specific concept of the reading; (b) capacity to connect it to issues or concepts developed in other texts; (c) capacity to develop a personal opinion about this reading; (d) capacity to explain or defend the relevancy of your opinion.

Teamwork assignment: mapping out the “chain of reference” of a news text

- Instructions: The purpose of this assignment is to map out and critically assess the body of evidence (or “chain of reference”) of a news text. It involves completing the following tasks: (1) graphically presenting how the various pieces of evidence of the text are connected to one another; (2) focusing on a subpart of the text’s chain of reference to show the various objections it answers; (3) detecting some the objections that the news text does not answer; (4) presenting two or three elements of the text that you had trouble analysing.
- Calendar: This assignment will be the focus of the last three classes. During class #3, precise methodological instructions will be presented to you and you will form teams. During class #4, you will briefly present the news text that you intent to analyse and start working on it under the professor’s supervision. During class #5, you will present your findings and discuss those of the other teams.
- Evaluation criteria: (a) capacity to explain how the text’ chain of reference is organized; (b) capacity to detect and rigorously present some of the objections it answers; (c) capacity to detect and illustrate some of the objections it does not answer; (d) capacity to explain the reasons why you had trouble analysing certain elements of the text in terms of chain of reference.

Final exam: short essay on journalistic objectivity

- Instructions: you will have two hours to write a short essay (2 to 3 pages) about journalistic objectivity. The exact instructions will be provided to you on the day of the exam.
- Calendar: the exam will be held on a date to be determined.
- Evaluation criteria: (a) capacity to correctly present some of the concepts presented in class; (b) capacity to connect at least two of the concepts of the course; (c) capacity to illustrate the concepts with concrete examples; (d) capacity to develop a personal opinion about the concepts; (d) capacity to explain or defend the relevancy of your opinion.

≡ BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Graves Lucas. (2017). Anatomy of a Fact Check: Objective Practice and the Contested Epistemology of Fact Checking. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 10(3), 518–537. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12163>
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- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: a study in the construction of reality*. New York;London: The Free press A Division of Macmillan; Collier Macmillan.

≡ EVALUATION METHODS

≡ SESSIONS

1 Criticizing journalistic objectivity

LECTURE : 03h00

We will review the main criticisms that have been addressed to journalistic objectivity, in particular the idea that objectivity is a “strategic ritual” used by journalists. Based on the texts of Tuchman (1972) and Graves (2017), we will also reflect on the limits of these criticisms.

Mandatory readings:

Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (4): 660–679.

Graves Lucas. (2017). Anatomy of a Fact Check: Objective Practice and the Contested Epistemology of Fact Checking. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 10(3), 518–537. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12163>

2 Rethinking journalistic objectivity

LECTURE : 03h00

Based on the work of Latour (2007), we will show how the notion of “chain of reference” (or “chain of experience”) allows us to rethink journalistic objectivity productively. In particular, we will see that this notion avoids the pitfalls of previous approaches by recasting objectivity as something that can be assessed in terms of degrees.

Mandatory reading:

Latour, B. (2007). A Textbook Case Revisited. Knowledge as mode of existence, In Hackett, E., Amsterdamska, O., Lynch M., & Wacjman J. (eds), *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (Third Edition), Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press. 83–112.

3**Evaluating news texts (part 1)**PRACTICAL WORK : 03h00

We will present and discuss a recent method to map out and assess the chains of reference of news texts (see Martine & De Maeyer, forthcoming). Using this technique, we will clarify the instructions of your teamwork assignment and form teams.

Mandatory reading:

Martine, T. & De Maeyer, J. (2018). Networks of Objectivity: Rethinking Objectivity Theory in Journalism. *Communication Theory*

4**Evaluating news texts (part 2)**PRACTICAL WORK : 03h00

Working with your team, you will present the news texts that you intent to analyse and start working on them. The professor will be available during all the session to answer your questions and clarify methodological points.

5**Presentation of your work**GROUP PRESENTATION : 03h00

You will present the findings of your analysis (see above the instructions of the teamwork assignment), discuss those of the other teams, and engage in a reflection about the challenges of this type of collective undertaking.
