

## Free Speech in a Post-Truth World

We all know – or at least think we do – what free speech is. But in this course we will begin by revisiting its meaning as it has evolved in the United States. We will review the origins of the concept and its embodiment in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, starting with the fact that the Constitution is a product of the Age of Reason. Next, we will examine key historical attacks on free speech that it survived, including the Red Scare of the 19-teens and twenties and McCarthyism. An outside speaker, Erica Ryan, Professor of History at Rider University, will give us an added bonus, commemorating the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920 by discussing the Red Scare as it was used to attack and discredit the suffragist movement and feminism, with lasting effect.

This background will give us the context to understand the use and misuse of free speech today, starting with the abandonment of the Enlightenment approach and the adoption of a new 21<sup>st</sup>-century concept (or at least a new name): “post-truth.” Post-truth was the Oxford Dictionary’s “word of the year” in 2016, defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In the last two years, the phenomenon it represents has only grown more embedded in American culture, as well as in other countries.

Another concept we need to revisit is populism, which seems also to be sweeping the world; however, this course will concentrate on the significance of populism and post-truth beliefs to maintaining American democracy. In doing so, we will look closely at the following:

- Attacks on journalists under the Espionage Act and on the mainstream media generally, both under the rubric of “fake news” and by trolls and hackers, as well as the ways in which professional journalism is being undermined by economic forces;
- The influence of cable news as it has come to dominate and divide viewers, while it seeks profits through behavioral marketing, particularly individualized targeting;
- Social media, particularly as vehicles for hyper partisanship and outlets for hate speech and right-wing conspiracy theories, abetted by technology that encourages the rise of bots and other disguises for malevolent actors, as well as by mass marketing techniques;
- Attacks on free speech on college campuses, including the implementation of “trigger warnings” and shout downs of invited outside speakers.

In addressing these themes, the instructor will rely on research by experts in the fields of history, politics and psychology, particularly a groundbreaking study published by three Harvard professors entitled Network Propaganda (available online). The objective is to determine whether the First Amendment can remain relevant in the post-truth US and what it will take for freedom of speech and the press, as we have understood them, to survive. Spoiler alert: the instructor is an optimist!

This is a participatory course, in which class members will be encouraged to read handouts, do their own research, raise questions and possibly make presentations for the rest of the class. Outside speakers who are invited to make presentations on certain topics will also be asked to take and respond to questions.

**No text will be required** for the course, but on-line sources and handouts will be provided. **Recommended reading** for background and discussion will also be listed on a syllabus to be provided before classes begin.

**Leader:** Elaine Jacoby is a retired attorney.

**Tuesdays:** 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 8 weeks: September 24 through November 19 (no class on 10/8)

**Location:** Monument Hall, Maximum 35 seats