

Anthro 4 - Contemporary Issues

This course prepares you to apply your anthropological knowledge to interpreting and intervening in public life. How do you find reliable information on a topic of public interest? How do you differentiate between stereotypes and good ideas? How does scientific and technical knowledge come to be authoritative and socially accepted, and why should we trust experts? Finally, how will you draw your ideas together into an analysis, and bring that analysis into public conversations?

One of the purposes of the social sciences has been to enter into public debates about social issues. Early social theorists developed their scholarship to address questions such as the effect of industrialization on social life, growing class inequalities, and changing gender roles. Social scientists today continue to attend to the issues that shape society, joining public conversations with journalists, pundits, public relations firms, government officials, activists, and others. With social media, it is easier than ever to enter into public conversations about political issues. In the class, we will examine the ways that other anthropologists have begun to comment on contemporary issues, and, using ideas and analyses from the course, begin to enter these conversations ourselves.

Readings and lectures focus on methods for approaching sources of information. During class we will analyze news and other media from a variety of different methodological angles. Your job will be to apply these methods to your own research topic, developing a thorough analysis over the duration of the course.

Course Requirements

- Students are expected to come prepared to class having completed the day's readings, and with a newspaper article and a short analysis drawing on that day's readings. Students will be chosen randomly to present their articles during each class section, and students found to be absent or unprepared will automatically lose 5% of their grade.
- Students will be required to write three short (2–3pg) papers throughout the course, applying the concepts and methods from the readings to resources related to their final research topic, as described in the course schedule.
- Each student will research and write about a contemporary public issue, drawing on five kinds of sources: 1) Popular or mainstream media; 2) non-English Language media (or English language from a country where the dominant language is not English); 3) Alternative media; 4) Technical or scholarly articles; 5) scholarly books. At the end of the class you will produce a research paper that discusses the relationship of sources and their forms of information to the way it is possible to understand the topic. Several short papers will provide building blocks for this final paper. Students will form research cluster groups based on their chosen topics. While final papers will be written individually, the groups will work together for class presentations and the public conversation assignment.

Possible topics include: the occupy wallstreet protests, the financial crisis and bailout, global climate change, disease pandemics, Arctic oil reserves, immigration, Guantanamo Bay and the treatment of 'enemy combatants,' the obesity epidemic, gay marriage.

- In their research cluster groups, students will be required to enter into public conversations about their chosen topic. This public engagement might take the form of traditional letters to the editor, participation in local political meetings, comment sections on newspapers or blogs, or even facebook or twitter conversations. Student public commentaries must draw on the

analytical skills and concepts presented in the course and present these analyses in a way appropriate to the chosen forum. Students will be required to consult with the instructor about their chosen public forum before participating, and are expected to maintain a thoughtful and respectful dialog at all times. In preparation for the public conversation assignment, students will be required to find and follow a public source of anthropologically-informed commentary on contemporary issues.

- During the final week of class, the research cluster groups will give short presentations that include: a) A brief summary of their chosen topic; b) an analysis of sources of information on this topic, drawing on course materials; c) a description of their public forum participation, including reception and responses (if any) that their commentary received.

Evaluation

- Attendance and participation — 15%
- Short papers — 30%
- Public conversation and group presentation — 15%
- Final paper — 40%

Week 1 — Introduction; Public Knowledge and Institutions

Bagdikian, Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston, Beacon Press.

Film: *Outfoxed*

Short Paper 1: Write a 1–2 page proposal for a final research paper. Draw on this week's readings and discuss how different sources may be relevant for understanding this topic. What kinds of sources will you need to find? What kinds of analyses will you need to draw on to judge their merit?

Week 2 — Genre; Representation I

Bauman, Richard. 1992. Genre. In *Folklore, cultural performances, and popular entertainments : a communications-centered handbook*. R. Bauman, ed. New York, Oxford University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. *Selections TBD*

Dower, John W. 1993. *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York, Pantheon Books. *Chapters TBD*

Film: *The Control Room*

Short Paper 2: Drawing on readings from the class so far, write a 2–3 page essay comparing two sources on your research topic. What conventions of genre shape the representations of the topic? How might an institutional analysis of the sources inform your reading? Be explicit about your use of class materials and give full citations for all media sources.

Week 3 — Representation II; Anthropology and Public Knowledge

Dower, John W. 1993. *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York, Pantheon Books. *Chapters TBD*

Besteman, Catherine Lowe, and Hugh Gusterson, eds. 2005. Why America's top pundits are wrong: Anthropologists talk back. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Assignment: Come to class this week prepared to discuss a source of anthropological commentary on contemporary issues. This might be from printed anthropology publications, blogs, twitter hashtags, or other public commentary forums. Students should come prepared with a description of the forum they found, what kinds of topics it engaged, what audience it reaches, and how it ties together anthropological critique and public engagement or conversation.

Week 4 — Science and Expertise in Public Debates

D.H. Guston. 2000. Between Politics and Science. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000). Chap. 2, Understanding the Social Contract for Science, pp. 37-63.

Carvallo, Anabela. 2007. Ideological cultures and media discourses on scientific knowledge: re-reading news on climate change. *Public Understanding of Science*, 16:223-243.

Boykoff, Jules M., and Maxwell T. Boykoff. 2004. Journalistic Balance as Global Warming Bias, Creating controversy where science finds consensus. In *Fair*. November/December Issue.

Greenberg, D.S. 2001. Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. Chap. 3, Vannevar Bush and the Myth of Creation, pp. 41-58.

Hilgartner, S. 2000. Science on Stage: Expert Advice as Public Drama. Stanford, Stanford University Press. *Chapters TBD*

Film *TBD*

Short Paper 3: Write a 2–3 page essay comparing a scientific or academic article about your topic with an article from the popular press. How is the boundary between science (or expertise) and non-science drawn? What are the political implications of crossing this boundary?

Week 5 — Knowledge and Action

Hager, Nicky, and Bob Burton. 2000. Secrets and Lies: The Anatomy of an Anti-Environmental PR Campaign. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.

Group presentations in class this week