

POLI 28: Ethics and Society II

Spring 2018

Instructor: David Wiens

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1 Course Description and Goals

Our personal and social lives are becoming increasingly networked via digital means. These trends raise complex and urgent ethical questions. This course will focus on developing concepts and skills that will enable you to diagnose these ethical issues and develop reasoned arguments about the ethical principles that we should use to guide our digital social life. Class sessions will be heavily discussion-oriented and you should come to class prepared to participate.

2 Course Texts

Please bring a copy of the assigned readings to class!

- Michael Patrick Lynch, *The Internet of Us* (Liveright, 2016)
- Cathy O’Neill, *Weapons of Math Destruction* (Crown, 2016)
- Bruce Schneier, *Data and Goliath* (Norton, 2015)
- Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform* (Picador, 2014)

Other readings will be made available electronically through Google Classroom.

3 Assessment

Your final grade will be based on three types of assignments:

6 <u>short</u> papers	40%
Class debate	30%
Final project	30%

For the short papers, only three submissions will count, so $40\% = 3 \text{ papers} \times 13\frac{1}{3}\%$.

Details for the assignments (including due dates, examples, templates, and grading standards) are available on Google Classroom on the About page.

Participation. Outstanding class participation can raise your final grade a one-third step (e.g., from B to B+); poor participation can lower your final grade a one-third step.

Note. Late assignments will not be accepted without an approved excuse.

4 Expectations

1. Personal Investment. Your success in this course depends on how much initiative you take to invest in your own learning. Simply recording notes from class will not get you very far—there are no exams testing your ability to recall what was said during class. Discussions will not exhaustively cover the details of the readings; they will serve as a guide to the readings, to alert you to important passages and raise some questions to prompt your own thinking about the readings. You should think of class meetings as “group training sessions”, where we will use individual and group discussion exercises to develop our reading and writing skills. These will be opportunities for you to ask questions about the readings, to help you get clarity on passages that were confusing; this presupposes that you have read carefully enough to know which passages confused you. Our meetings will also be opportunities for you to try out your own ideas about the issues we’ll discuss; this presupposes that you’ve done some thinking about the issues prior to arriving in class. The requirements are designed so that success in this course will require an average investment of 9–12 hours per week including class time (approx. 3–4 out-of-class hours for every in-class hour).

2. Technology I won’t ban laptops, tablets, etc. in lectures. However, use of technology is strongly discouraged—it typically creates distractions for other members of the class, which have negative effects on the classroom dynamic. (I won’t hesitate to ask you to put it away if it becomes a distraction.) If you take notes, I strongly encourage you to do so with old-fashioned pen and paper.

3. Respect for Others. Ethical reasoning is a collaborative process and students learn it best by participating in that process. Such a participation-heavy environment requires that each of us gives others adequate space to participate, in addition to recognizing that we don’t know everything. We must work to cultivate an environment in which people do not hesitate to ask “silly” questions, make mistakes, or disagree with others. We will disagree (sometimes vigorously) with each other and we will work through our disagreements in class. But our debate will always be conducted respectfully.

Note: Conducting class discussions respectfully does not mean that everyone gets to be right all the time; it does not mean that we must avoid critically evaluating one another’s claims. Rather, respectful discussion involves acknowledging that you have a limited perspective on an issue and that your thinking can be enriched by viewing an issue from someone else’s perspective. Respectful discussion involves seriously considering the possibility that you might be wrong and that someone who thinks differently than you might be right.

4. Out-of-Class Help. You are welcome to come to us (myself and the TAs) for help with your assignments (but you aren’t required to do so—this depends upon how much you are willing to invest in this class). However, there are some guidelines to prevent last-minute calls/emails and to insure that we are able to make time to help you.

(1) Please try to see us during office hours (we’ve scheduled these to be at times when we’re sure to be available). If these hours are not convenient, it is possible to set up an appointment at

a mutually convenient time. To set up an appointment with me (I'll leave it to the TAs to set their own policies), send me an email with the subject line "[POLI 28] Appointment request". In the body of the email, indicate 3-5 times that work for you. I will choose a time that works for me from that list.

- (2) If you have a question or concern about the class, please search the syllabus or the course website for the answer. If there is no answer to be found, then feel free to email me or your TA or post to Google Classroom about any questions or concerns and I will try to reply to you within 24 hours. If you need an answer right away, email may not be the best option. (If this is the case, you may have waited too long.)
- (3) We will not read assignment submissions in advance and tell you what we think needs improvement. If you would like help with a submission, come prepared to tell us which aspects of the assignment concern you and, together, we will figure out how to address your concerns.

5. Email. (The TAs will set their own email policies.) I am trying to minimize the amount of time I spend corresponding by email. Accordingly, I will only reply to emails requesting an appointment to meet with me. I will not answer emails concerning administrative matters, nor will I offer advice on assignments over email. If you have administrative or assignment questions, you are welcome to meet with me outside class or to approach me at the start or end of a class session. Please start the subject line with "[POLI 28]", otherwise the email is likely to fall through the cracks of my inbox.

If you have a general question about the course (i.e., one that is not specific to your situation), please post it to Google Classroom rather than send an email. I will try to answer all Classroom posts within 24 hours.

6. Grade Disputes. We are more than willing to re-examine assignment grades with you if you feel your work deserves a better grade. There are two steps to this process:

- (1) You must wait 24 hours after the assignment as been returned before you approach your TA.
- (2) You must approach your TA with a written justification for your complaint (a single paragraph is fine). In this, you must outline why you think your work deserves a better grade and where the discrepancy lies between your work and the assigned grade.
- (3) If you are unsatisfied with your TA's judgment, you can appeal to me using the same process.

Warning: If you challenge a grade, we reserve the right to reset the grade *as we see fit*. Opening a grade dispute means a re-examination of the assignment. Thus, your grade will not necessarily improve and may even go down.

7. Plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense, and will be treated as such. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. Any case of plagiarism will be referred to the Academic Integrity Office.

Plagiarism will be defined as follows:

Plagiarism is representing someone else's ideas, words, statements or other works as one's own without proper acknowledgment or citation. Examples of plagiarism include:

- Copying word for word or lifting phrases or a special term from a source or reference — whether oral, printed, or on the Internet — without proper attribution.
- Paraphrasing, that is, using another person's written words or ideas, albeit in one's own words, as if they were one's own thought.
- Borrowing facts, statistics, or other illustrative material without proper reference, unless the information is common knowledge, in common public use.

7. Accommodations. If you feel that you need an accommodation for any sort of disability or for religious reasons, please discuss this with me as early as possible (after class, in office hours, or by email).

5 Reading Schedule

Subject to revision.

Week 1 (M) — *Introduction*—

Week 1 (W) — *Ethical criteria: Mutual advantage*—

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chaps. 13, 14 (paras. 1–11), 15 (paras. 1–3), 17 (paras. 1–13)

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, part 1 (secs. 2, 6, 7)

Discussion sections: Organization; practice four sentence papers

Week 2 (M) — *Ethical criteria: Public interest*—

Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 1 (secs. 1–2), bk. 7 (sec. 1); *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1 (secs. 7, 8)

Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chaps. 1, 4

Week 2 (W) — *Ethical criteria: Rights*—

John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, chaps. 2, 4

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, chap. 3 (pp. 26–35, 42–45, 48–51)

Discussion sections: Practice four sentence papers

Week 3 (M/W) — *Corporate surveillance*—

Schneier, chaps. 4 & 10 (pp. 147–154)

Lynch, chap. 5

O’Neill, chap. 4

Proposition: It is ethically permissible for private corporations (e.g., Google, Facebook) to do whatever they want with the data they collect about your online behavior, so long as you agree to their terms of service.

Discussion sections: Debate practice

Four sentence paper due

Week 4 (M/W) — *Targeted campaigns*—

O’Neill, chap. 10

Lynch, chap. 3

Schneier, chap. 8 (pp. 133–137)

Proposition: It is ethically permissible for political organizations to construct “voter profiles” or purchase “consumer profiles” from data brokers (e.g., Acxiom) and use these to refine the targeting of their advertising and GOTV (get out the vote) campaigns.

Discussion sections: Debates

Four sentence paper due

Week 5 (M/W) — *Algorithms and social opportunities*—

O’Neill, chaps. 6–7

O’Neill, Introduction and chap. 1

Taylor, chap. 6 (pp. 205–211)

Schneier, chap. 8 (pp. 128–133)

Proposition: It is ethically permissible for employers and universities to make hiring and admissions decisions using algorithmic data analysis.

Discussion sections: Debates

Eight sentence paper due

Week 6 (M/W) — *Online shaming* —
Ronson, “How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Saaco’s Life”
Sacks and Notopoulos, “Harvard Revoked Admission Offers To At Least 10 Students After They Posted Offensive Memes”
Lynch, chap. 3
Proposition: It is ethically permissible to marginalize, alienate, and exclude people who behave offensively on social media.

Discussion sections: Debates

Eight sentence paper due

Week 7 (M/W) — *Echo chambers* —
Lynch, chaps. 3–4
Taylor, chap. 4 (pp. 117–140)
Proposition: It is ethically permissible for social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to customize each person’s media feed using online behavior data (e.g., likes, clicks, friends, etc.).

Discussion sections: Debates

Twelve sentence paper due

Week 8 (M/W) — *Reliable sources?* —
Taylor, chaps. 3, 4 (pp. 104–116)
Lynch, chap. 2
Proposition: Journalism should be not-for-profit and subsidized by public (e.g., taxpayer) funds.

Discussion sections: Debates

Twelve sentence paper due

Week 9 (M/W) — *Content sharing* —
Bilton, “Disruptions: Facebook Users Ask, “Where’s Our Cut?””
Taylor, chap. 1
Taylor, chap. 2
Proposition: Content sharing platforms (e.g., Facebook, Youtube, Twitter) are ethically required to pay a small licensing fee to content creators (e.g., the songwriter, artist, author) whenever their content is shared on their platform.

Discussion sections: Debate (if necessary); Work on final projects (if no debate)

Week 10 (M/W) — *Data-based policing* —
O’Neill, chap. 5
Schneier, chap. 7
Proposition: It is ethically permissible for law enforcement agencies to direct their law enforcement activities using data obtained from private corporations without the user’s consent.

Discussion sections: Work on final projects (if no debate)

Final project due