

THE NEWS VS. THE TRUTH
Jon Klein '80
Former President, CNN/U.S.

A multidisciplinary exploration into the growing mistrust of mainstream media, increasingly siloed sources of information, and disagreement about fundamental facts.

This study group will examine how journalists work, and how the brain works to decide what it believes to be true, even in the face of contrary evidence. Featuring guest lectures from practitioners of objective reporting, partisan rhetoric, and social media; as well as from Professor Steven Sloman from the Department of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences.

The format is four two-hour sessions, featuring brief lectures followed by discussion. Guest speakers will present for 15-20 minutes, followed by moderated Q&A with students. In addition to reading assignments, students will be expected to watch, read or listen to examples of news coverage that illustrate the theme of each session, and prepare comments or questions about it.

The study group will follow an arc that begins with the norms of traditional journalism – encountering those who adhere to and violate them; then delve into how the human mind decides what is true. Next, we'll explore how politicians, celebrities, and vested interests in the U.S. and abroad leverage that psychology to sway opinion, often using nefarious methods. Culminating with a discussion of whether there is any way out of the deeply divided path in which we find ourselves today.

1. NEWS NORMS, THEIR CHAMPIONS AND VIOLATORS

What are the norms of objective news reporting, and its limits? How has traditional journalism been undermined by conservative media, and how vast is the resulting gulf in American society? Guest speaker: Anderson Cooper, CNN.

Assigned readings will include selections from:

- News Values, by Jack Fuller
- Reporter, by Seymour Hersh (autobiography of the famed investigative reporter)
- The Loudest Voice in the Room, by Gabriel Sherman (unauthorized biography of Fox News founder Roger Ailes)
- “Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology,” David Roberts, Vox
- “They Don’t Give a Damn About Governing – Conservative Media’s Influence on the Republican Party,” Jackie Calmes, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy

2. HOW DO WE “KNOW” WHAT IS TRUE?

The psychology behind what we believe and why we cling to it. Is group identity and emotion more important than facts? With examples drawn from current events, and prescriptions for a less polarized, better-informed society. Led by Prof. Steven Sloman, Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences.

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- The Knowledge Illusion, by Steven Sloman & Philip Fernbach.

3. USING THE NEWS

The business of manipulating public opinion – overtly through public relations campaigns and delegitimizing mainstream news outlets; subtly through the symbiosis of journalists and their subjects in covering politics, business, and entertainment; falsely through the dissemination of fake or “plausibly true” news via social media.

Guest speaker: Kay Madati, Global Head of Content Partnerships, Twitter

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- This Town, by Mark Leibovich (Washington’s strange bedfellows, political and journalistic)
- Fire And Fury, by Michael Wolff (insider accounts of the Trump White House)
- The Four, by Scott Galloway (the DNA of Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Apple)
- “Breitbart-led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda,” Columbia Journalism Review

4. THE FUTURE OF NEWS (AND TRUTH)

Where do we go from here? How can journalists meaningfully inform a nation riven by fundamental disagreements about core values and rising mistrust of institutions including media itself? We will explore approaches from both the supply (media practitioners) and demand (news consumers) side of the information marketplace.

Invited guest speaker: Chris Hayes, MSNBC anchor.

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- Twilight of the Elites, by Chris Hayes
- Jay Rosen Twitter feed
- “Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions,” Pew July 2017

The study group will meet Mondays from 2-3:50 in Room 110 at the Watson Institute, Stephen Robert Hall, 280 Brook Street.

The group will meet on February 11 and 25, and March 4 and 11.