

Discourse in the Age of Political Upheaval and Artificial Intelligence

Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference at UCLA

Keynote speaker: Dr. Julia Alekseyeva, University of Pennsylvania

Submission form: <https://forms.gle/ynHiRZothVVkgVdp8>

If you face any difficulties in the submission process or have questions about the conference,

please email: discourseconferenceucla@gmail.com

- Submission deadline: **(EXTENDED)** March 23rd at 11:59PM PST
- Acceptance notifications: Decisions will be released at the end of March
- Conference date: May 7-8th, in person only at UCLA

How does one study discourse today in a society overflowing with communication tools, yet increasingly incapable of sustaining conversation? As Michel Foucault argues in his seminal analysis of medical, political, and educational institutions, discourse describes practices that “systematically form the objects of which they speak.” While these institutional practices were once the primary case studies for scholars of discourse—shaping the language, knowledge, and power structures that dictated what could be said, who could say it, and what counted as legitimate truth—today we must reconcile the impact of algorithms, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence. The contemporary moment certainly presents a bleak bind, with the growing concentration of tech monopolies controlling information exposure, billionaires like Peter Thiel openly pronouncing that “freedom and democracy” are incompatible, and authoritarian politics growing in prominence and popularity around the world. With conspiracy theories guiding presidential decisions, privately owned digital “echo chambers,” rapidly produced misinformation, and large language models like Grok identifying as MechaHitler and creating sexualized images of real women and children, the terrain of discourse is more troubled than ever.

Although contemporary communicative challenges appear to be the product of technological oversaturation, the same issues haunted the state of discourse throughout the 20th century. The domination of monopoly capital in the 1920s, the fascist publics of the 1940s, the impossibility of conversation “after Auschwitz,” and the disappearance of meaning amidst endless repetitions of postmodernism provide only a small sample of discourse’s many “deaths.” Each, however, is paired with an immediate revival—be it unions and labor demonstrations, decolonial revolutions, non-aligned movements, anti-war protests, or feminist and queer activism.

Despite the grim prospects of discourse today, we are convinced an equal amount of openings persist. New or, at least, more egalitarian discursive imaginaries must be possible. Does it serve

us to expand the terms of public discourse? If so, what previously excluded groups, voices, geographies, and subject positions are we missing that might fundamentally reconfigure the way we confront or reevaluate increasingly authoritarian political discourses? Or, what if hope resides outside of language and data and instead in practices that resist structural understanding—be it in affect theory, desire, or the vibrant, unthought matter of technology itself? Or, what if we fail to understand exactly how technology mediates the terms of discourse and must instead map its contours quantitatively—by auditing algorithmic platforms, analyzing their impact on marginalized groups, and demanding transparency from tech companies? While a utopian belief in technology’s ability to bring about egalitarian change is now seen as naive, does it still hold promise? Technology may not only amplify but also disrupt misinformation, increase awareness of legal rights, expand access to medical information, and assist the organization of publics by aiding communication and reducing inter-group disagreement.

This conference seeks to expand on prior discourse analysis methodologies to tackle the unfolding crisis of contemporary discourse. We invite graduate students and scholars to help map a new direction by mobilizing a range of qualitative and quantitative, new and overlooked, and past and present methodologies capable of opening political possibilities.

Possible topics of submission might include but are not limited to:

- Contemporary discursive subversions in popular media
- Global resistances to discourse homogenization and authoritarian rhetoric
- Critiques and reinventions of the public sphere and digital commons
- Critical Gen-AI and algorithmic platform studies
- Reinventions of technology and its deployment
- Histories of “troubled” discourse (fake news, misinformation, deep fakes, conspiracies)
- Platform and LLM impact on discourse creation, curation, and perception
- LLMs in dialogue with gender, disability, and critical race studies
- Prejudices and biases in LLMs and their political stakes

Our keynote Julia Alekseyeva is an Assistant Professor of English and Cinema & Media Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She researches interactions between global media and radical politics, with a particular focus on Japan, France, and the USSR. Her first academic book, *Antifascism and the Avant-Garde: Radical Documentary in the 1960s* (UC Press), was published in February 2025.

Prof. Alekseyeva is also author-illustrator of the award-winning graphic memoir *Soviet Daughter* (Microcosm, 2017). Alongside publishing articles on film, art, and politics, she is also the guest editor of three forthcoming issues for *Arts*, *JCMS*, and *The Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*.