

UW-Madison: Journalism and Mass Communication Scholars receive major funding to study Polarization and Civic Renewal

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MADISON – Researchers in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have received \$1 million from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to establish the Center for Communication and Civic Renewal. The funding will support the continuation and expansion of a 10-year study of Wisconsin's state and regional communications systems, to be housed under the new center.

Center leadership will draw on experts across several disciplines. Professors Lew Friedland, Dhavan Shah and Mike Wagner, along with collaborators in the Department of Political Science (Katherine Cramer), Department of Statistics (Karl Rohe), the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (William Sethares), and Boston University (Chris Wells), are co-principal investigators on the project.

Since 2010, researchers at the UW have used a unique approach to assess how state and regional information contributes to – or helps to ameliorate – polarization. The center's research team will expand on this work, seeking to understand the state of politics and communication in Wisconsin over the last decade using ongoing public opinion research, computational content analysis of media, and qualitative fieldwork and interviews of citizens and elites. The center will conduct comparative public opinion research in swing states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and North Carolina to further an understanding of ways Wisconsin is similar and different from other battleground states.

“Understanding how we move beyond polarized politics and toward civic renewal is a large-scale effort that requires detailed and extended study of the communication ecology and its social consequences using a range of approaches,” says Shah, who will lead the computational efforts. “Without support from Knight Foundation, this kind of multi-year, multi-method project would be impossible. But it is only through this kind of holistic research that we can start to understand how to heal our fractured political culture.”

Wagner, who has written about workings of American democratic institutions and processes, says that by studying how the news and conversations on social media influence attitudes and political behavior and knowledge, the center seeks an understanding of how Wisconsin politics became so contentious.

“We want to understand what we can do to help ease that polarization and encourage more productive political processes in the legislature and between citizens across lines of political difference. The fracturing in Wisconsin is a problem because democracy requires cooperation and compromise across lines of political difference,” Wagner says.

STORY CONTINUES AT <https://news.wisc.edu/uw-scholars-receive-major-funding-to--study-polarization-and-civic-renewal/>