

Political Science 334:
Seeking Truth in an Age of Misinformation, Cynicism, and Political Polarization

University of Washington
Autumn 2019

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Overview of Class:

Many commentators have proclaimed that we are living in an era of “post-truth,” defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The forces leading to this phenomenon have been building in the U.S. and around the world over the last few decades. An academic movement often called “postmodernism” has asserted that there are no overarching truths, just local truths relative to each person or community. Meanwhile, the public has lost confidence in the institutions that used to serve as arbiters of truth, including the media, business, government, and organized religion. The information environment now includes both fake news and false allegations of fake news. The result is a profound challenge: How can anyone know what’s true? The answer for many people today is whatever feels true from within the filter bubble of their social media and personal networks.

This course will focus on the difficulties of separating fact from fiction in the contemporary world. Recognizing the need to examine competing perspectives on important topics, the syllabus includes authors writing from a range of political and ideological orientations (left, right, centrist, libertarian, etc.). We will learn the tools of critical and scientific thinking and then apply them to politics and other areas of controversy. We will gain insights into the political and cognitive biases that guide how people interpret information, form beliefs, and resist changing their minds. In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. By understanding the errors in intuition, perception, and memory that can lead people astray and create a tribal mentality, students will strengthen their ability to recognize their own biases and evaluate claims through reason and evidence. Along the way, we will investigate why so many Americans embrace conspiracy theories, reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus, and accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also examine the production and consumption of false information and how a person can navigate the Wild West of claims and counterclaims easily accessible online.

Workload:

Students should expect a higher-than-average workload in keeping up with the weekly readings, videos, and podcasts. There will be roughly two hours of preparation outside of class required for every hour in class, or about 12 hours total per week.

Course requirements:

The grading is based on two in-class exams and a paper due during finals week. The exams will cover the lectures plus the assigned readings and audio and video recordings. Note that there is no traditional final exam. The second exam will cover only material from the second half of the class.

Grading breakdown:

First exam: 30%

Second exam: 30%

Paper assignment: 40%. You will submit your paper through Turnitin, a program that organizes online submissions and assists in detecting plagiarism.

Religious Accommodations:

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy, <https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form, available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

Disability Accommodations:

Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary or permanent disability that requires accommodations (this can include but not limited to; mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924, or uwdrs@uw.edu. See the DRS website at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>

Academic Honesty:

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. A suspected instance will be reported and disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington's academic honesty policy, please refer the Student Conduct Code at <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/student-code-of-conduct/>

Plagiarism and VeriCite

The University has a license agreement with VeriCite, an educational tool that helps prevent or identify plagiarism from Internet resources. Your instructor may use the service in this class by requiring that assignments are submitted electronically to be checked by VeriCite. The VeriCite Report will indicate the amount of original text in your work and whether all material

that you quoted, paraphrased, summarized, or used from another source is appropriately referenced.

Schedule of Topics

Thursday, September 26 Introduction to the class

Read/listen/watch:

Stephen Colbert, *The Word—Truthiness* (just the first segment, not the whole episode)

Kendra Cherry, *The Benefits of Being Open-Minded*

Skeptic Presents, *What Is a Skeptic?*

Kathryn Schulz, *On Being Wrong*

Van Jones, *Safe Spaces on College Campuses*

Robert George and Cornel West, *Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression*

Katie Herzog, *Twitter, Trans Kids, Call-Out Culture, and a \$10,000 Blunt*

Tuesday, October 1 Premodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Augustine of Hippo, letter 93 to Vincentius, chapter 2, paragraphs 6 and 8; and chapter 6, paragraph 20

Thomas Aquinas, *The Sin of Blasphemy*

Martin Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*

Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*. Focus on #s 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 21, 55, 77, 78, and 80

Wikipedia entry on film version of *Fiddler on the Roof*

Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, lyrics and music to *Tradition*

Thursday, October 3 Modern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Steven Pinker, *Reason Is Not Negotiable*

Logan Chipkin, *Dogma Is Not Confined to the Cathedral*

Charles Cooke, *Do We Still Want Free Speech?*

Michael Shermer, interviewed by Jacob Mchangama on *Clear and Present Danger*

Erik Gilbert, *Liberal Orthodoxy and the New Heresy*

Twisted Sister, lyrics and music to *We're Not Gonna Take It*

Tuesday, October 8 Postmodern approaches to truth, part I

Read/listen/watch:

Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*

Helen Pluckrose, *How French "Intellectuals" Ruined the West*

Albert Mohler, *Postmodernism and Society*

Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Why Can't We Hate Men?*

Reza Aslan, interview on *The Daily Show*

Jesse Singal, *Reza Aslan on What the New Atheists Get Wrong about Islam*

Lin-Manuel Miranda, lyrics and music to *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story*

Thursday, October 10 Postmodern approaches to truth, part II

Read/listen/watch:

Lee McIntyre, Post-Truth, interviewed by Agah Bahari on Neohuman

Sarah Haider, Dissent and Free Speech, interviewed by Julia Galef on Rationally Speaking

Musa Al-Gharbi, Viewpoint Diversity Is About More than Politics

Lara Schwartz, False Equivalence, interviewed by Chris Martin on Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Jerry Taylor, The Alternative to Ideology

Tuesday, October 15 How the premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to truth can each go awry

Read/listen/watch:

Encyclopedia Britannica, Tomás de Torquemada

Keri Blakinger, Spheres of Influence: Houston Woman Shares Her Flat Earth Gospel Via YouTube

VICE on HBO, How Truth Lost its Meaning in Trump's America (only the first 8:10)

Helen Pluckrose, interviewed by Yascha Mounk on The Good Fight

Ben Shapiro, Religious Belief and the Enlightenment, interviewed by Jordan Peterson

Stephen Clouse, More Heat Than Light: Ben Shapiro's The Right Side of History

Thursday, October 17 Fallacies and biases that undermine reasoning

Read/listen/watch:

David Ferrer, 15 Logical Fallacies You Should Know before Getting into a Debate

Carol Tavris, Stop Self-Deception, interviewed by Amy Alkon on HumanLab

Carl Sagan, The Fine Art of Baloney Detection

David Robson, The Intelligence Trap, Moral Algebra, and Disrationalia, interviewed by Adam Conover on Factually!

Tuesday, October 22 Flaws in intuition

Read/listen/watch:

Andrew Shtulman, Scienceblind, interviewed by Michael Shermer on Science Salon

Lisa Belkin, The Odds of That

Annie Duke, Thinking in Bets, interviewed by Julia Galef on Rationally Speaking

Steven Novella, How to Think Like a Skeptical Neurologist

Laurie Santos, The Happiness Lab, interviewed by David McRaney on You Are Not So Smart

Thursday, October 24 Flaws in perception and memory

Read/listen/watch:

Daniel Simons, Seeing the World As It Isn't

Steven Novella, Body Snatchers, Phantom Limbs, and Alien Hands

Elizabeth Loftus, The Malleability of Memory, interviewed by Adam Conover on Adam Ruins Everything

Regina Rini, Deepfakes Are Coming

Lindsay Beyerstein, On Bullshit: Harry Frankfurt, Donald Trump, and Indifference to Truth

Tuesday, October 29 First exam

Thursday, October 31 Origins and effects of political polarization

Read/listen/watch:

Lilliana Mason, Uncivil Agreement, interviewed by Russ Roberts on EconTalk

Zeynep Tufekci, Why Online Politics Get So Extreme So Fast, interviewed by Ezra Klein on The Ezra Klein Show

Musa al-Gharbi, interviewed by B. Duncan Mönch on Keeping It Civil

Ezra Klein, How Politics Makes Us Stupid

Tuesday, November 5 Tribalism and truth

Read/listen/watch:

Tom Jacobs, Why We Engage in Tribalism, Nationalism, and Scapegoating

Amy Chua, Political Tribes, interviewed by Doug Fabrizio on RadioWest

Andrew Sullivan, American Wasn't Built for Humans

Paul Bloom, The Psychology of Tribalism, interviewed by Robert Wright on The Wright Show

Thursday, November 7 Does (or can) the news media uncover truth?

Read/listen/watch:

American Press Institute, The Lost Meaning of 'Objectivity'

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (1926 version)

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (2014 version)

Brent Cunningham, Re-thinking Objectivity

Elizabeth Guo and Amanda Su, Harvard Affiliates Rally for Abolish ICE Movement

Act on a Dream at Harvard College, Harvard Crimson: Stop Calling ICE for Comment

Angela Fu and Kristine Guillaume, A Note to Readers

The Economist, The New Censors

The Onion, CNN Holds Morning Meeting to Decide What Viewers Should Panic about for Rest of Day

Carolyn Hax, Everything Is on Fire

Tuesday, November 12 Traditional media, new media, and social media

Read/listen/watch:

Shankar Vedantam/Hidden Brain, Fake News: An Origin Story

Kate Starbird, Beyond "Bots and Trolls": Understanding Disinformation as Collaborative Work

Beckie Supiano, Students Fall for Misinformation Online. Is Teaching Them to Read Like Fact Checkers the Solution?

Danah Boyd, Did Media Literacy Backfire?

Nicholas Phillips, What My Fellow Conservatives Can Learn from the Left

Meghan Daum, Nuance: A Love Story

Thursday, November 14 Political ideology and science denial

Read/listen/watch:

Lee McIntyre, The Scientific Attitude, interviewed by Michael Shermer on Science Salon

Steven Novella, Scientific Consensus

Luana Maroja, Self-Censorship on Campus is Bad for Science

Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise, talk at Politics and Prose bookstore

Tuesday, November 19 What can go wrong in the conduct or communication of science

Read/listen/watch:

Ed Yong, A Waste of 1000 Research Papers

Oren Cass, No, Not that Evidence

Jerry Taylor, A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides, interviewed by Indre Viskontas on Inquiring Minds

documentary Merchants of Doubt

Thursday, November 21 Universities and truth

Read/listen/watch:

Katherine Mangan, Have Campuses Become Ideological Echo Chambers? Not Necessarily

Musa al-Gharbi, A Lack of Ideological Diversity is Killing Social Research

Jeffrey Sachs, Do Universities Have a Self-Censorship Problem?

Katie Herzog, Yes, There's a Free Speech Crisis, and No, I Won't Shut Up About It

Glenn Loury and John McWhorter, It's Hard to be an Individual

Robin DiAngelo on white fragility, interviewed on We Talk Different

Tuesday, November 26 Are there moral truths?

Jacob Hess, The Beauty at the Heart of the Academy Worth Fighting For

Irshad Manji, interviewed by Jonathan Kay on Quillette Podcast

William Barr, speech at the University of Notre Dame Law School on October 21, 2019

Thursday, November 28 No class (Thanksgiving)

Tuesday, December 3 Conspiracy theories

Read/listen/watch:

documentary Behind the Curve

Mark Horowitz, Inherent Bias in Academia and Politics, interviewed by Chris Shelton on Sensibly Speaking

Sacha Baron Cohen, speech at the Anti-Defamation League

Thursday, December 5 Second exam

Wednesday, December 11 Paper due