

GOVT 30: Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

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“It is better to know less than to know so much that ain’t so.”
–Josh Billings

“It takes strength to admit you don’t know everything. Weakness is thinking you don’t need expert advice and only listening to sources that confirm what you want to believe.”
–Arnold Schwarzenegger

“What we’ve seen is what some people call truth decay... the sense that not only do we not have to tell the truth, but the truth doesn’t even matter.”
–Barack Obama

Class schedule and office hours

Class: TTH 10:20 AM–12:10 PM ET and Friday 4–4:50 PM ET (x-period)
Office hours: Monday 9–10 AM, 1–2 PM; Wednesday 9–10 AM, 2–3 PM ET

Overview of the course

Why are false and unsupported beliefs about politics and public policy seemingly so prevalent and hard to address? This course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to misperceptions and conspiracy theories and the reasons that corrections so often fail to reduce the prevalence of these phenomena. We will also analyze how those tendencies are exploited by political elites and consider possible approaches that journalists, civic reformers, government officials, and technology platforms could employ to combat misperceptions. Students will develop substantive expertise in how to measure, diagnose, and respond to false beliefs about politics and public policy; methodological expertise in reading and analyzing quantitative and experimental research in social science; and writing skills in preparing a final research paper analyzing the development of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory.

Instructional approach

Each class period will include a mix of lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them, class discussion, and active learning exercises in which we critically examine and apply the ideas introduced in the readings.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Identify the psychological factors that promote belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories;
- Assess the ways in which elites and the media may promote false or unsupported claims;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to countering misperceptions and conspiracy theories;
- Assess concerns that widespread belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories undermines democracy.

I expect each student to complete and understand the assigned readings. However, we will aspire to not just learn this material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing connections between the readings, and critiquing authors' assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you take these additional steps in your thinking over the course of the quarter.

Course requirements and expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each class and to contribute to class discussion. I do not expect you to understand every technical detail — we will work through the readings in class together — but you should read each one carefully (see below for tips on how to do so effectively). Each student will be expected to contribute to class discussion and to be respectful of others in the class.

Reading scientific articles

If you find deciphering scientific articles to be difficult, I recommend consulting guides like “[How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps](#)” by Amanda Hoover Green or “[How to Read a \(Quantitative\) Journal Article](#)” by Greta Krippner, which present approaches you might use to help you identify the most important elements of each study.

This set of questions might also be useful to guide your reading and to help you assess your understanding of the assigned articles:

Experimental/statistical studies:

- What is the authors' *main hypothesis*?

- What is the *mechanism* (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their *general approach to testing* their theory?
- What are their *key results*?
- How are those results *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Conceptual articles:

- What are the authors' *main hypothesis* or *argument*?
- What are the *key claims* or *concepts* in their argument?
- What are the *mechanisms* they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Slack for class discussion and questions

Students often want to ask questions about the scientific articles we read for class or share interesting material they encountered that is related to what we are studying. We will use the Slack messaging app to facilitate these conversations; it makes it possible for you to more effectively learn from each other outside of class and also to benefit from my answers to other people's questions. Please note that you can of course email me privately at any time, come to office hours, etc. With that said, I will often encourage you to post questions and/or answers we discuss via email to Slack because it allows us to benefit from the collective intelligence of the class as a group. In particular, I will ask you to post comments and questions on the readings before each class on Slack. I will also use it to communicate with you when you are working independently in groups during class.

Communication and course materials

I will use Canvas to email official announcements to the class and to provide access to assigned readings that are not available online (this PDF includes hyperlinks to almost all of the readings). You should submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email unless otherwise instructed. For all other concerns or questions, though, please talk to me before or after class, come to my office hours, or email me so we can communicate directly.

Course materials

No books are required for this course. Almost all assigned readings can also be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. The remainder will be posted on Canvas. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the VPN to access articles behind paywalls.)

Note: I frequently assign news articles and other types of non-academic content to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled “Context and examples” below to distinguish them from “Core readings.” Both are required but you should devote particular effort to the academic articles, which are typically more difficult to read and understand.

Studying

Many students do not study as effectively as they could. I highly recommend [Vox's guide](#) to improving how you study. For more information, please contact the [Academic Skills Center](#) and/or see this list of resources from the [Center for Research on Learning and Teaching](#).

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding and following [the academic integrity rules](#) at Dartmouth. Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade. Details on citing sources appropriately are available from the [Institute for Writing and Rhetoric](#). In general, you should *always* err on the side of caution in *completely* avoiding the use of language from authors you have read or from your classmates absent proper attribution. Please contact me *immediately* if you have *any* questions or concerns about academic integrity standards.

Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities who may need disability-related academic adjustments and services for this course are encouraged to see me privately as early in the

term as possible. Students requiring disability-related academic adjustments and services must consult the Student Accessibility Services office (205 Col-
lis Student Center, 646-9900, Student.Accessibility.Services@Dartmouth.edu).
Once SAS has authorized services, students must show the originally signed
SAS Services and Consent Form and/or a letter on SAS letterhead to me. As a
first step, if you have questions about whether you qualify to receive academic
adjustments and services, you should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and
discussions will remain confidential.

Student wellness

I recognize that the academic environment at Dartmouth is challenging, that
our terms are intensive, and that classes are not the only demanding part of your
life. There are a number of resources available to you to support your wellness,
including [your undergraduate dean](#), [Counseling and Human Development](#), and
the [Student Wellness Center](#). I encourage you to use these resources and to
speak with me if you have concerns.

Office hours

Office hours are designated times that faculty members set aside each week
specifically for students to ask questions about the course material or college in
general on a one-on-one basis. Many students come to office hours to ask about
how to prepare for upcoming exams or what they could have done better on
past exams. I'm very happy to talk about both topics, of course, but I would
also encourage you to bring substantive questions about the course material
that come up in your reading or writing where I might be able to help you
understand a concept or assist you in developing or expressing an idea.

My office hours are Monday 9–10 AM and 1–2 ET and Wednesday 9–10 AM
and 2–3 PM ET. Please schedule a meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce
page at <https://go.oncehub.com/nyhan>. (If you cannot meet then, please
email me to request an alternate time.)

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. All work
is due at the time specified in the syllabus and on Canvas unless otherwise noted.
Late work will not be accepted without prior permission. (I recognize that our
current circumstances are challenging for many students. Please contact me
immediately if there are circumstances beyond your control that affect your
ability to submit work on time.)

In-class / online participation (10%)

I expect students to be prepared to ask questions in class and engage with ma-
terial from the readings and lectures — in other words, to be active participants

in the learning process. Merely attending class does not constitute adequate participation. In grading participation, I am looking for evidence that you have completed the readings and are engaging with the course material deeply (in other words, quality > volume). This type of intellectual engagement can include posing questions, identifying relevant examples, making connections between topics, critiquing theoretical claims or empirical findings, referencing news or other articles that illustrate course concepts, and presenting arguments that are grounded in the course material. These contributions can take place during lectures, class discussion, or when students report back after small-group discussion. I recognize that students vary in the extent to which they are comfortable speaking in class and thus will evaluate contributions that take place both during class (verbally and in the chat on Zoom) and on Slack. The latter also allows students to ask questions about specific points of confusion in the readings, which are often difficult and technical, and to answer them for each other. These are each important forms of participation as well.

Discussion questions (10%)

Starting in the second week of the course, students will be required to post a comment or question of up to three sentences on each of the core readings to Slack by 8 AM ET on the day of class. You may skip five classes during the quarter without penalty (just post “Skip.”). These posts can be factual questions about the study design and results or comments you want to offer on the findings and their implications. I may ask you to elaborate on these thoughts during class. For grading purposes, I will evaluate these comments and questions for how thoughtful and constructive they are and how much they contribute to the class conversation.

Midterms (40%)

The class will include two midterms (20% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course (i.e., the second will only cover the portion of the course after the first midterm). These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays. A study guide for the midterms that includes more information on the exams is provided at the end of this syllabus. (Note: Both exams will be curved.)

Analytical paper: The development of a myth (40%)

Assignment: Each student will write a social science paper of 3000–4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories from the course to help explain the development and spread of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory and critique the efforts that were made to counter it.¹ This paper

¹Again, please make sure the topic is a misperception or a conspiracy theory as we define it in this course! Please see me if you have questions.

should explore intellectual terrain we have not covered in detail in the course (either by choosing a less familiar misperception or by investigating new contexts or questions that were not adequately considered in class or the readings).

In choosing a topic, don't put too much pressure on yourself to come up with a totally new idea. Here are two approaches that might be helpful:

1. Pick an interesting case that you think is hard to categorize or explain. Think about what makes that misperception surprising or puzzling and build from there. Why are standard approaches based on authors we've read or that you've found unsatisfactory? (You don't need to have a full answer at this point in the process but at least a notion would be helpful.)
2. Don't try to invent a new theory from scratch but instead ask "What would author X predict in case Y?" Try to identify an interesting conflict between theory and data or an important gap in a theory.

Once you have chosen a topic, you should construct a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations about the development, timing, spread, or features of the myth in question and/or the reasons that fact-checking of it was ineffective. Don't try to explain everything! It's better to go deeper in making a novel argument about one aspect of your topic than to offer a laundry list of explanations or to recapitulate the conventional view. (You can even assume or briefly summarize a conventional view and then show how your argument goes beyond it to emphasize what is most new and different.) The goal is for you to develop and explain one or more theoretically motivated predictions about the misperception; evaluate them using historical sources, journalistic accounts, and/or quantitative data; and reflect on the implications of your findings.

The final paper should specifically answer these key questions:

1. What evidence do we have that the myth has circulated widely? Who spread it? Who believes it?
2. How can we use the theory in question to understand the myth's spread?
3. Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
4. What implications does this case have for the theory in question?
5. What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
6. What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?

You should make sure your answers to these questions engage with relevant specifics about your case where possible — beware of vague assertions about its prevalence or circulation. With that said, make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to summaries of other people's work. The goal of the assignment is for you to make an original argument about a myth or misperception, not to recapitulate other research

or recount the history of the myth in exhaustive detail. Finally, beware of the risk of hindsight bias. It may seem obvious in retrospect that a misperception developed, but keep the contingency of history in mind. In particular, look for cases in which some aspects of the myth failed to develop and spread while others flourished. What explains the difference?

Process: We will talk throughout the term about how to do this type of writing. For useful advice on writing analytical papers in political science, please see the assigned readings for the class on academic writing, but the most important factor will be your willingness to commit to writing as an iterative process of drafting, feedback, review, and revision.

A draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on April 18 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 8 PM on April 25. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version. A complete draft of your paper including references is due on Canvas by 8 PM on May 16 for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft based on that feedback and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance.² The final version is due by 8 PM on May 30. The rubric I will use to evaluate it is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Note: Late work, including paper proposals and drafts, will result in a reduction of your final grade on the paper by one letter grade for each day it is submitted after a deadline.)

Extra credit: Applications and case studies

Students may send me articles, clips, or other examples that are particularly relevant to the points we have discussed. If I use what you send me in class, you will receive 0.5% extra credit toward your final grade (up to 1% per student).

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that we will use several x-periods. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (3/30)

- Course syllabus

²To consult an RWIT tutor, you can make an appointment online or submit your paper for asynchronous feedback — see [the instructions](#) provided on their website for details.

Understanding misperception belief

What is a misperception? Who is misinformed? (4/1)

Core readings:

- Emily K. Vraga and Leticia Bode (2020). “Defining Misinformation and Understanding its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation.” *Political Communication* 37(1): 136–144.
- Jianing Li and Michael W Wagner (2020). “The Value of Not Knowing: Partisan Cue-Taking and Belief Updating of the Uninformed, the Ambiguous, and the Misinformed.” *Journal of Communication* 70(5): 646–669.

Context and examples:

- Glenn Kessler and Scott Clement (2018). “Trump routinely says things that aren’t true. Few Americans believe him.” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018.
- Daniel A. Cox and John Halpin (2020). “Conspiracy theories, misinformation, COVID-19, and the 2020 election.” American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, October 13, 2020.
- Joel Rose (2020). “Even If It’s ‘Bonkers,’ Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories.” National Public Radio, December 30, 2020.
- Daniel A. Cox (2021). “After the ballots are counted: Conspiracies, political violence, and American exceptionalism.” American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, February 11, 2021.

The psychology of false beliefs (4/6)

Core readings:

- Lisa Fazio, Raunak Pillai, and Deep Patel (N.d.). “The effects of repetition on belief in naturalistic settings.”
- Gillian Murphy, Elizabeth F. Loftus, Rebecca Hofstein Grady, Linda J. Levine, and Ciara M. Greene (2019). “False Memories for Fake News During Ireland’s Abortion Referendum.” *Psychological Science*.

Context and examples:

- Glenn Kessler and Joe Fox (2021). “The false claims that Trump keeps repeating.” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2021.
- Glenn Kessler (2015). “Trump’s outrageous claim that ‘thousands’ of New Jersey Muslims celebrated the 9/11 attacks.” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2015.
- Ben Brumfield and Nadia Kounang (2015). “5 myths surrounding vaccines – and the reality.” CNN, September 17, 2015.

Bias in information exposure, processing, and interpretation (4/8)

Core readings:

- Erik Peterson and Shanto Iyengar (2021). “Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?” *American Journal of Political Science* 65(1): 133–147.
- Martin Bisgaard (2019). “How Getting the Facts Right Can Fuel Partisan-Motivated Reasoning.” *American Journal of Political Science*.

Context and examples:

- Ed Lavandera and Jason Morris (2017). “As the seas around them rise, fishermen deny climate change.” CNN, May 31, 2017.
- Ozan Kuru, Josh Pasek and Michael Traugott (2016). “If my candidate is behind, the poll must be biased.” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2016.
- Daniel Dale (2017). “Donald Trump voters: We like the president’s lies.” *Toronto Star*, March 26, 2017.

Experiments and statistics primer (4/9–x-period)

Experiments:

- Rachel Glennerster and Kudzai Takavarasha (2013). *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Excerpts from Chapter 2. (Canvas)
- Sample article: Anthony Bastardi, Eric Luis Uhlmann, and Lee Ross (2011). “Wishful Thinking: Belief, Desire, and the Motivated Evaluation of Scientific Evidence.” *Psychological Science* 22(6): 731–732.
- Assignment (must be uploaded to Canvas by 1 PM before class): Submit 3–5 questions about the experimental designs in the sample article, the inferences the authors draw, and/or the statistical analyses they conducted. Read it closely! We will work through the article in detail during class.

Statistics:

- William D. Berry and Mitchell S. Sanders (2000). *Understanding Multivariate Research*, pp. 1–39, 45–49. (Canvas)
- Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

Assessing the evidence for motivated reasoning (4/13)

Core readings:

- Dan M. Kahan, Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic (2017). “Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government.” *Behavioral Public Policy* 1(1): 54–86.

- James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (2019) “The evidence for motivated reasoning in climate change preference formation.” *Nature Climate Change* 9: 111–119.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). “Political Knowledge Does Not Guard Against Belief In Conspiracy Theories.” YouGov Model Politics, November 5, 2012.
- Josh Clinton and Carrie Roush (2016). “Poll: Persistent Partisan Divide Over ‘Birther’ Question.” NBC News, August 10, 2016.
- Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks (2017). “This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama’s.” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2017.

Group identity and misperceptions (4/15)

Core readings:

- Hakeem Jefferson, Fabian G. Neuner and Josh Pasek (2020). “Seeing Blue in Black and White: Race and Perceptions of Officer-Involved Shootings.” *Perspectives on Politics*.
- Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood (N.d.). “Typecast: A Routine Mental Shortcut Causes Party Stereotyping.”

Context and examples:

- Adam Serwer (2015), “Why We’re Finally Taking Down Confederate Flags,” BuzzFeed, June 24, 2015.
- This American Life (2016). “Will I Know Anyone at This Party?” October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)
- More in Common (2019). “The Perception Gap.” (Take the quiz first.)

The effect of elite cues on public beliefs (4/20)

Core readings:

- John Zaller (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Chapter 6. (Canvas)
- Michael Tesler (2018). “Elite Domination of Public Doubts About Climate Change (Not Evolution).” *Political Communication* 35(2): 306–326.

Context and examples:

- Vera Bergengruen (2020). “How Republicans Are Selling the Myth of Rampant Voter Fraud.” *Time*, October 22, 2020.

- Garance Burke, Martha Mendoza, Juliet Linderman, and Larry Fein (2021). “Some local GOP leaders fire up base with conspiracies, lies.” *Associated Press*, February 26, 2021.
- Ezra Klein (2014). “Why Neil deGrasse Tyson’s dismissal of anti-GMO concerns matters.” *Vox*, August 1, 2014.

The effects of misinformation and corrections of it (4/22)

Core readings:

- Sahil Loomba, Alexandre de Figueiredo, Simon J. Piatek, Kristen de Graaf, and Heidi J. Larson (2021). “Measuring the impact of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on vaccination intent in the UK and USA.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 5: 337–348.
- Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Wood (2020). “Taking Corrections Literally But Not Seriously? The Effects of Information on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability.” *Political Behavior* 42: 939–960.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2010). “Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate.” *The Forum* 8(1).

Academic writing/proposal review (4/23–x-period)

- Erin Ackerman (2015), “ ‘Analyze This:’ Writing in the Social Sciences,” in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (eds.), *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, 3rd ed. (Canvas)
- Optional reading: John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing”
- Optional reading: Tim Büthe, “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science”
- Due 8 PM on 4/18: Proposal draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review
 1. Consider the key questions for the assignment:
 - How can we use the theory in question to understand the myth’s spread?
 - Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
 - What implications does this case have for the theory in question?

- What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
 - What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?
2. With these questions in mind, identify at least two specific aspects of the proposal that seem especially strong and at least two that need further development.
 3. With these questions in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions that could help the author think about how best to develop the ideas expressed in the proposal.
- Class discussion of paper assignment
 - Review and discussion of peer review responses

Applications: Climate change (4/27)

Core readings:

- Chad Hazlett and Matto Mildemberger (2020). “Wildfire Exposure Increases Pro-Environment Voting within Democratic but Not Republican Areas.” *American Political Science Review*.
- Matthew H. Goldberg, Abel Gustafson, Matthew T. Ballew, Seth A. Rosenthal, and Anthony Leiserowitz (2019). “A Social Identity Approach to Engaging Christians in the Issue of Climate Change.” *Science Communication* 41(4): 442–463.

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2013). “Hot In My Backyard.” May 17, 2013 (Acts One and Two).
- Brad Plumer (2019). “How the Weather Gets Weaponized in Climate Change Messaging.” *New York Times*, March 1, 2019.
- Tracy Jan (2018). “In North Carolina, hurricanes did what scientists could not: Convince Republicans that climate change is real.” *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.

Applications: Crime and COVID (4/29)

Core readings:

- Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Oliver Wright (1996). “Crime in Black and White: The Violent, Scary World of Local News.” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1.3: 6–23.

- Hunt Allcott, Levi Boxell, Jacob Conway, Matthew Gentzkow, Michael Thaler, and David Yang (2020). “Polarization and public health: Partisan differences in social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.” *Journal of Public Economics* 191: 104254. (Skip the model in Section 2.)

Context and examples:

- Maggie Koerth and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux (2020). “Many Americans Are Convinced Crime Is Rising In The U.S. They’re Wrong.” FiveThirtyEight, August 3, 2020.
- COVID States Project (2020). “Report #14: Misinformation and Vaccine Acceptance.” September 2020.

Midterm 1 (5/4)

- Midterm course survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9HMDtZJs7iNy31Y) must be submitted before class

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and conditions (5/6)

Core readings:

- Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009). “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(2): 202–227.
- Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*, Ch. 6. (Canvas)

Context and examples:

- Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, and Sander van der Linden (2020). “How to Spot COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories.” George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.
- John Cook (2020). “Plandemic and the seven traits of conspiratorial thinking.”
- Stuart A. Thompson (2021). “Three Weeks Inside a Pro-Trump QAnon Chat Room.” *New York Times*, January 26, 2021.
- Adrienne LaFrance (2020). “The Prophecies of Q.” *The Atlantic*, June 2020.

Who believes in conspiracy theories? (5/11)

Core readings:

- J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (2014). “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 952–966.
- Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart (2016). “Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 824–844.

Context and examples:

- David Nakamura (2020). “‘Thugs’ on a plane: Trying to paint Biden as extreme, Trump ramps up promotion of conspiracy theories.” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2020.
- Matthew Rosenberg and Maggie Haberman (2020). “The Republican Embrace of QAnon Goes Far Beyond Trump.” *New York Times*, August 20, 2020.
- Daniel A. Cox (2021). “Social Isolation and Community Disconnection Are Not Spurring Conspiracy Theories.” American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, March 4, 2021.

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and online misinformation (5/13)

Core readings:

- Justin Schon (2020). “How Narratives and Evidence Influence Rumor Belief in Conflict Zones: Evidence from Syria.” *Perspectives on Politics*.
- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018). “The spread of true and false news online.” *Science* 359(6380): 1146–1151.

Context and examples:

- Kate Starbird, Emma Spiro, and Jevin West (2020). “This COVID-19 misinformation went viral. Here’s what we learned.” *Washington Post*, May 8, 2020.
- Brady Zadrozny and Ben Collins (2020). “In Klamath Falls, Oregon, victory declared over antifa, which never showed up.” NBC News, June 6, 2020.
- Khushbu Shah (2020). “When Your Family Spreads Misinformation.” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2020.

- Joshua Zeitz (2017). “Lessons From the Fake News Pandemic of 1942.” *Politico Magazine*, March 12, 2017.
- Katie Rafter (2014). “Curfew rumors false, officials say.” *The Dartmouth*, October 17, 2014.

“Fake news” and online misinformation 2016–2021 (5/18)

Core readings:

- Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer (2019). “Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” *Science* 363(6425): 374–378.
- Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (2020). “Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 U.S. election.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4: 472–480.

Context and examples:

- Craig Silverman (2016). “This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook.” BuzzFeed, November 16, 2016.
- Brendan Nyhan (2019). “Why Fears of Fake News Are Overhyped.” Medium, February 4, 2019.
- Election Integrity Partnership (2020). “Repeat Offenders: Voting Misinformation on Twitter in the 2020 United States Election.” October 29, 2020.

Media coverage and fact-checking

Addressing misinformation in mainstream media coverage (5/20)

Core readings:

- Graham N. Dixon and Christopher E. Clarke (2013). “Heightening Uncertainty Around Certain Science: Media Coverage, False Balance, and the Autism-Vaccine Controversy.” *Science Communication* 35(3): 358–382.
- Eric Merkley (2020). “Are Experts (News)Worthy? Balance, Conflict and Mass Media Coverage of Expert Consensus.” *Political Communication* 37(4): 530–549.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). “Enabling the jobs report conspiracy theory.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 8, 2012.

- Derek Thompson (2018). “Trump’s Lies Are a Virus, and News Organizations Are the Host.” *The Atlantic*, November 19, 2018.
- Phillip Bump (2018). “Why untrue tweets from Trump shouldn’t be unchallenged in headlines.” *Washington Post*, June 13, 2018.
- Elahe Izadi (2020). “The QAnon problem facing local journalism this election season.” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2020.

Paper draft peer review (5/21–x-period)

- Due 8 PM on 5/16: Paper draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review (pairs)
 1. Read the paper carefully
 2. Consider where the author performs well and where the author could improve in addressing the key questions for the assignment:
 - How can we use the theory in question to understand the myth’s spread?
 - Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
 - What implications does this case have for the theory in question?
 - What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
 - What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?
 3. Consider where the author performs well and where the author could improve in meeting the rubric criteria described at the end of the syllabus:
 - Thesis/argument
 - Originality
 - Evidence
 - Use of course concepts
 - Organization
 - Quality of expression
 4. Using the assignment questions and rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and at least two that could be improved further.
 5. Using the assignment questions and rubric criteria, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise their paper.
- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (5/25)

Core readings:

- Oscar Barrera, Sergei Guriev, Emeric Henry, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya (2020). “Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics.” *Journal of Public Economics* 182: 104123.
- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2015). “The Effect of Fact-checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on U.S. State Legislators.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 628–640.

Context and examples:

- Review – fact-checkers: [PolitiFact.com](#), [Washington Post Fact Checker](#), [Factcheck.org](#), [Snopes](#)
- Cary Spivak (2011). “The Fact-Checking Explosion.” *American Journalism Review*, December 2, 2010.
- Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact (2019). “Fact checking doesn’t work (the way you think it does).”

Fighting misinformation online (5/27)

Core readings:

- Gordon Pennycook, Ziv Epstein, Mohsen Mosleh, Antonio A. Arechar, Dean Eckles, and David G. Rand (2021). “Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online.” *Nature*.
- Andrew Guess, Michael Lerner, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and Neelanjan Sircar (2020). “A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(27): 15536–15545.

Context and examples:

- Jack Nicas (2020). “Can YouTube Quiet Its Conspiracy Theorists?” *New York Times*, March 2, 2020.
- Bridget Barrett, Daniel Kreiss, and Madhavi Reddi (2020). “Enforcers of Truth: Social Media Platforms & Misinformation.” Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, May 22, 2020.
- Ellen P. Goodman and Karen Kornbluh (2020). “How Well Did Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube Handle Election Misinformation?” *Slate*, November 10, 2020.

Misinformation paper due (5/30, 8 PM)

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (6/1)

Core readings:

- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2018). “The New Conspiracists.” *Dissent*, Winter 2018.
- Robert Mejia, Kay Beckermann, and Curtis Sullivan (2018). “White lies: a racial history of the (post)truth.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15(2): 109–126.

Context and examples:

- Jane Lytvynenko (2020). “In 2020, Disinformation Broke The US.” Buzzfeed, December 6, 2020.
- Joe Uscinski (2020). “Playing down the rabbit hole: The conspiracy-theory crisis isn’t what you might think it is.” *The Globe and Mail*, September 5, 2020.
- Ethan Zuckerman (2021). “Fixing disinformation won’t save us.”
- David Karpf (2019). “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths.” MediaWell, December 10, 2019.
- Sean Illing (2021). “The fantasy-industrial complex gave us the Capitol Hill insurrection.” Vox, January 8, 2021.
- Kevin Roose (2021). “How the Biden Administration Can Help Solve Our Reality Crisis.” *New York Times*, February 2, 2021.

Midterm 2 (TBD)

Exam study guide

Syllabus description

The class will include two midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays.

Exam details

- Each covers approximately half the class
- Tests *conceptual* knowledge and understanding of readings and lectures, not tiny details of individual studies or examples
- Items may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays (up to one page)

Questions to review for core readings

Scientific studies (experimental/statistical):

- What is the authors' *main hypothesis*?
- What is the *mechanism* (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their *general approach to testing* their theory?
- What are their *key results*?
- How are those results *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Conceptual (non-empirical):

- What is the authors' *main hypothesis* or *argument*?
- What are the *key claims or concepts* in their argument?
- What are the *mechanisms* they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Sample question (brief essay)

Briefly explain the difference between “fact avoidance” and “meaning avoidance” according to [Gaines et al. \(2007\)](#) and summarize their findings.

Analytical paper rubric

Criteria	A	B	C/D/F
Thesis/argument	Clear, strong arguments that go beyond description, address important objections	Discernible arguments but not strong/clear enough or too much description	Unclear or weak arguments; mainly description or assertion; incomplete
Originality	Creative new arguments or approaches—combines or applies theories in new ways	Some analytical originality in approach; opportunities for greater creativity	Little originality; relies mainly on arguments and evidence from class/readings
Use of course concepts	Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to research topic	Conveys familiarity with course concepts; applies concepts to topic appropriately	Basic course concepts not applied appropriately; incorrect or incomplete
Evidence	Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided in support of arguments	Details and facts support arguments, but more needed or some lacking relevance	Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and/or lack relevancy
Organization	Clear, logical organization that develops argument appropriately; does not stray off topic	Organization not totally clear; some digressions or lack of needed structure	Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from agreed-upon topic
Quality of expression	Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice	Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing	Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing