Course Summary
The accelerating proliferation of misinformation poses an urgent threat to American democracy. False or misleading news reports can spread faster than COVID-19, while novel “cheapfakes,” “shallowfakes,” and “deepfakes” challenge the very foundation of our information ecosystem. Our seminar aims to shed a clarifying light on the contemporary media landscape, and to equip students to better understand the past and contemporary impact of misinformation. Students will also learn strategies to combat the dangers posed by novel forms of misinformation as well as how emerging technologies can be used to create a more just and inclusive society.

We will begin by first situating misinformation (as well as disinformation) within a longer history of hoaxes, humbug, and “fake news.” We will then explore the more recent forces that have shaped our fraught media ecology, which have resulted in propaganda campaigns, conspiracy theories, and the rise of deliberately deceptive deepfake videos. Lastly, our seminar will focus on media for the public good, including instances of grassroots networked advocacy as well as synthetic projects geared towards satire, investigative documentary, and community history.

A series of questions will animate our discussion throughout the semester. How old is misinformation? What constitutes “truth” and “fact” in our digital age? Are there ethical or legal responsibilities of media platforms and to what extent should government regulate our information environment? What is the role of socially engaged art and journalism in society today? Our interdisciplinary course ultimately aims to cultivate a more discerning public. To this end, we will combine fine-grained close reading with conceptual interpretation, critical studies with creative practice. Scholarly articles, white papers, and news reports from a range of fields will inform our exploration.

Learning Goals
By the conclusion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Define key concepts such as “misinformation,” “deepfake,” and “civic media.”
2. Understand different forms of false or misleading information, the disruptive role they play within our information ecology, and the threat they pose to societies around the world.
3. Employ interdisciplinary methods to critically analyze misinformation and emerging media. In addition to learning techniques of close analysis, students will become familiar with how digital forensics, verification, and policy are all crucial to combatting misinformation.
4. Locate, research and properly cite primary and secondary sources from a variety of institutions and online archives.
5. Recognize the ways that synthetic media can be used for the civic good.
Grading

Attendance/participation (20%); Historical misinformation case study (20%); Group presentation (30%); Media for the civic essay (30%)

Assignments are due by Tuesday at 11:59 on the day listed on the syllabus. For each assignment that is late, the grade will drop half a letter grade. For example, an “A” will become an “A-“

Engagement

OFFICE HOURS
I will be holding office hours each Monday at 10am. These conversations will not be evaluated or graded. Rather, they are designed to be informal conversations where you’re invited to ask a question or share some thoughts about the class.

ATTENDANCE
Because our discussions are so important to our learning about media, attendance at each class meeting is mandatory. Over the course of the semester, you are allowed two unexcused absences. Missing more than 50% of the classes in any three-week period before the drop date will automatically remove you from the course. Six unexcused absences will result in an F for the course.

PARTICIPATION
This course is collaborative and will work well when everybody comes to class prepared to contribute. Participation itself may take a number of forms; for example, responding to questions posed in class or asking questions about a reading, film, or another student’s comment. While we do not always have to agree with each other, we must always try to be respectful of different opinions. It’s natural to feel nervous about speaking publicly in any kind of class setting. I’m happy to chat to discuss strategies for participation. Public speaking is a learned skill and we’ll develop this skill throughout the semester.

Assignments

HISTORICAL CASE STUDY
Misinformation is hardly new. False and deceitful media has circulated for 100s of years. Whether it was generated for an advertising ploy or as a form of official state propaganda, untrue information has surfaced in different contexts and served a variety of purposes. Your task will be to write a 5-page account of an historical case study of misinformation. You may focus on a particular kind of falsehood, such as “disinformation” or “malformation.” The example must be before the year 2000 and could involve any kind of media. Your case study could originate from within the halls of a government institution, be manufactured by a corporation or even a private citizen. The following questions will help to guide your research: Who created this work of media and what does it communicate? How did it circulate and what were some consequences? Proquest newspaper holdings will aid in your research.

PRESENTATION: COMBATTING MISINFORMATION
There are many strategies being proposed and implemented to combat misinformation. Working in groups of three, research one of them in-depth and present it to the class. Examples could include government regulation, tech platforms investing in content moderation, third-party watchdogs, or grassroots efforts to bolster a credible
and independent press. Your 20-minute presentation should include a range of visuals and text. Describe the motivations behind a particular strategy and your assessment of its effectiveness. We will speak in class about examining different sources for your research, including tech journalism, mainstream news periodicals, and articles from scholars and public intellectuals about how to fight the threat and consequences of misinformation.

**EMERGING MEDIA FOR THE CIVIC GOOD**

Just as we have covered how emerging media can be used to manipulate and deceive, we have also examined the civic possibilities of contemporary technology. You will write a 7-pg. paper that analyzes one particular example, devoting special attention to the following: how is a particular technology being used toward a civic outcome? What is the question or challenge that it is addressing? Can you detect qualitative or quantitative impact? Is there a larger public perception or resonance? You might select a film, such as the recent documentary, *Welcome To Chechnya* (David France, 2020), which uses AI to protect the identity of witnesses. Or, you might select the public history project Dimensions in Testimony, which stages conversations between AI-enabled simulations of camp survivors and museumgoers.

**Academic Integrity**

Any work submitted in this course must be your own. Passing off another’s work as your own—whether one has directly quoted from it or not—is called plagiarism; this is also known as academic theft and is a serious offense. You must acknowledge all material that you consult, even if you do not directly cite it. Online sources are no different from any other. Plagiarism can affect your permanent academic record. If you are unsure about how to acknowledge a source, please consult a writing handbook or ask me.

**Inclusive Classroom Environment**

We value a diverse learning environment enriched by the race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, socioeconomic status, ability, culture, political philosophies, geographical backgrounds, and intellectual perspectives of its students, faculty, staff, and administrators. We believe diversity makes the whole richer, and that participating in a dynamically inclusive community provides a framework for successful leadership and engaged citizenship in the 21st century.

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**INTRODUCTION**

**Pandemic–Infodemic: Viral Media and Our Epistemic Crisis**

**TUESDAY**

Syllabus, get to know each other, discussion of our media habits.

**THURSDAY**

PART 1: HISTORICAL FORCES

Humbug, Hoaxes, and “Fake News”

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

Privatizing the Public Sphere

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

The Rise of Right-Wing Media

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

PART 2: POISONING THE STREAM

Social Media and its Discontents

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

Alt-Right News, Trumpism, and the 2016 Election

TUESDAY
THURSDAY

Deepfakes – From the Margins to the Mainstream

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

PART 3: CIVIC MEDIA

Media Literacies

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

Ethics and Aesthetics of the Archive: In Event of Moon Disaster

TUESDAY
Read dossier of materials on IEOMD website; Roger D. Launius, “Responding to Apollo: America’s Divergent Reactions to the Moon Landings,” in *Limiting Outer Space: Astro Culture After Apollo* vol. 2, 2018.

THURSDAY
Read “Behind the Scenes,” “Moon Conspiracy Theories,” “Why We’ve Made This Deepfake.” Available on the Resources section of the IEOMD website.

Satire as Political Critique

TUESDAY

Networked Journalism as Community Media

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

Synthetic Media as Public History

TUESDAY

THURSDAY
Lauren Styx, “How are Museums Using Artificial Intelligence, and is AI the Future of Museums,” MuseumNext, September 18, 2020.

Identity Fashioning and the Politics of Presence

TUESDAY

THURSDAY

Open Ending

TUESDAY
We will collectively decide on the topic and readings for this week. Options could include issues of civic media and misinformation related to the pandemic, the climate crisis, racial justice, or political elections.