

SYLLABUS: MEDIA LITERACY IN THE AGE OF DEEPFAKES

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Class Time
Tuesday____
Thursday____

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 good essay (30%)

Assignments are due by 11:59 on the day listed on the syllabus. For each day an assignment 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 “malinformation.” 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 on 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.

INTRODUCTION

Pandemic–Infodemic: Viral Media and Our Epistemic Crisis

TUESDAY

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

THURSDAY

Malaka Gharib, “Fake Facts Are Flying About Coronavirus,” NPR, February 21, 2020; AJ Willingham, “How the Pandemic and Politics Gave Us a Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories,” CNN, October 3, 2020; Paula Span, “Getting Wise to Fake News,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2020; (dossier from the World Health Organization).

Week 1

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 2

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 3

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 4

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 5

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 6

Tuesday date
Thursday date

PART 1: HISTORICAL FORCES

Humbug, Hoaxes, and “Fake News”

TUESDAY

Kevin Young, “Moon Shot: Race, a Hoax, and the Birth of Fake News,” *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2017; Kevin Young, “The Age of Imposture,” in *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (Minneapolis: Grey Wolf, 2017).

THURSDAY

Neil Harris, “The American Museum,” “The Operational Aesthetic,” in *The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Privatizing the Public Sphere

TUESDAY

Bob McChesney, “Corporate Media Consolidation,” *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997); Patricia Aufderheide, “Shaping of the Act,” *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996* (New York: The Guilford Act, 1999).

THURSDAY

John T. Caldwell, “The Crisis of Network Television,” in *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

The Rise of Right-Wing Media

TUESDAY

David Brock, et. al., “Attack and Destroy” and “Building a Movement,” in *The Fox Effect: How Roger Ailes Turned a Network into a Propaganda Machine* (New York: Anchor, 2012).

THURSDAY

Nicole Hemmer, “The Leaders,” *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

PART 2: POISONING THE STREAM

Social Media and its Discontents

TUESDAY

Tarleton Gillespie, “The Myth of the Neutral Platform,” in *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

THURSDAY

Safiya Umoja Noble, “A Society, Searching,” *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

Alt-Right News, Trumpism, and the 2016 Election

TUESDAY

Yochai Benkler et. al., “Dynamics of Network Propaganda,” in *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Week 7

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Watch:

deepfake video
compilation on
YouTube

Week 8

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Week 9

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Watch: [In Event of Moon Disaster](#)
(MIT/Center for
Advanced
Virtuality)

Week 10

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Watch:

Compilation of
faux newscasts,
mockumentary,
Deepfakes

THURSDAY

Casey Williams, "Has Trump Stolen Philosophy's Critical Tools?" *NYT*, April 17, 2017; Matt Taibbi, "The End of Facts in the Trump Era," *Rolling Stone*, February 8, 2017; Jeet Heer, "America's First Postmodern President," *The New Republic*, July 8, 2017.

Deepfakes – From the Margins to the Mainstream

TUESDAY

Samantha Cole, "AI-Assisted Fake Porn is Here and We're All Fucked," *VICE*, December 11, 2017; Joan Donovan and Britt Paris, "Deepfakes and Cheap Fakes: The Manipulation of Audio and Visual Evidence," *Data & Society*, September 2019.

THURSDAY

Henry Ajder et. al., *The State of Deepfakes: Landscape, Threats, Impact, Deeprace*, September 2019; Nina Schick, "R/Deepfakes," "Deepfakes in the Wild," *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse* (New York: Boston, 2020).

PART 3: CIVIC MEDIA

Media Literacies

TUESDAY

Alex Juhasz, "[#100hardtruths-#fakewews](#)"; Alex Juhasz, "Fake News Poetry Workshops," Alex Juhasz, "Radical Digital Media Literacy in a Post-Truth Anti-Trump Era," *Radical Teacher* 111, 23-29.

THURSDAY

Carol Choksy, "[Training the Masses in 'Informational Awareness.'](#)" *Proceedings from the Document Academy* vol. 4:2; Sam Gregory, "Prepare, Don't Panic: Synthetic Media and Deepfakes," *Witness Media Lab*; Paul Mihailidis, "Media Literacy's Civic Problem" and "Designing Civic Media Literacies," in *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

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

Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era* New York: NYU Press, 2009); Alisa Lebow, "Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary," in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Amber Day, "Truthiness and Consequences in Parodic News," *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Emily Nussbaum, "How Jokes Won the Election," *The New Yorker*, Jan 2017; Garrett, Bond, and Poulsen, "Too Many People Think Satirical News is Real," *The Conversation*, Aug 2019.

Week 11

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Networked Journalism as Community Media

TUESDAY

Colin Rhinesmith, "Community Media Infrastructure as Civic Engagement," in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, ed. by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Victor Pickard, "American Media Exceptionalism and the Public Option," "The Media We Need," in *Democracy Without Journalism: Confronting the Misinformation Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

THURSDAY

Sasha Costanza-Chock, "Design Practices: Nothing About Us Without Us," in *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020); Patricia Zimmermann, "Reverse Engineering: Taking Things Apart for the New GlobalMedia Ecology," in *Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2019).

Week 12

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Synthetic Media as Public History

TUESDAY

[Dimensions in Testimony. USC](#); Matthew Fishbane, "[Do Holocaust Survivors Dream of Electric Sheep?](#)" *Tablet*, April 21, 2020; Davina Pardo, "116 Cameras," *Op-Docs*, September 19, 2017.

THURSDAY

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

Week 13

Tuesday date
Thursday date

Identity Fashioning and the Politics of Presence

TUESDAY

D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2013).

THURSDAY

Ruha Benjamin, "Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice," *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (New York: Polity, 2019); Kamal Sinclair & Jessica Clark, "Toolkit for Change," [Making a New Reality](#), Ford Foundation/Immerse/Sundance, August 2020.

Week 14

Tuesday date
Thursday date

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, racialjustice, or political elections.