

Fact Check: Debunking Hoaxes, Conspiracy Theories and Fake News

Class meets Wednesdays from 12:30 to 1:45 p.m. in E254 AJB from August 22 to October 24, 2018

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Office hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

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Course Overview

During the 2016 United States presidential election campaign, the term “fake news” rose to prominence in popular culture and conversation. The realization that people and groups were purposely creating, disseminating, and popularizing “news” stories that were deliberately fake struck a chord with many Americans. In this first-year seminar, we will explore news hoaxes, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation with a focus on building critical thinking skills to assess information quality. We will look back at some pre-internet news hoaxes and conspiracies to situate the current “fake news” moment in a longer history of popular fakery, but we will spend most of our time learning about contemporary examples that are spread through websites like Reddit and 4Chan and popularized on mainstream social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

From fake celebrity deaths to manipulated photos to “pizzagate” and Cambridge Analytica, this class will delve into what makes these lies appealing to us, why we spread them, and what we can do to better equip ourselves to recognize falsehoods. The goal of this class is to build media literacy skills and to better understand our evolving social-news media environment.

This class requires engagement with current events and is discussion-based. Grades will be based on class participation, short writing assignments and presentations on relevant current examples of conspiracies, hoaxes, misinformation campaigns, and fake news.

SJMC Learning Outcomes

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is committed to your academic and professional success. In line with this commitment, we have identified particular learning outcomes for the JMC curriculum. Our course addresses the following outcomes:

Media literacy:

- You will demonstrate knowledge of the basic tenets of media literacy and how media literacy relates to your personal media habits and professional development.
- You will develop critical thinking skills to analyze and interpret media messages through an understanding of media practices and institutions.

Course-Specific Objectives

By the end of this class you will be able to:

- Understand the historical roots and antecedents of contemporary hoaxes, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation
- Recognize the features of hoaxes, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation
- Think and write critically about news, information, and misinformation

Expectations

Required Reading, Listening and Viewing

This course has one required book: *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* (2011), Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (paperback with new afterword). You can buy the book from the Iowa Hawk Shop or from online sellers like Amazon.

In addition, this course will require weekly reading, listening and viewing of relevant examples. All required materials will be posted on ICON as a link or pdf at least one week in advance of class.

Late policy

Writing assignments are due at the start of class indicated. You must be in class to get credit for your writing assignment. No extensions will be given unless you have truly extenuating circumstances. In these cases, you must speak with me **before** the assignment is due to make an arrangement. Technology excuses are not acceptable. Writing assignments turned in late without an approved extension will receive a maximum of half credit.

Diversity and Discussion

In this class, we will be discussing current events and contemporary social issues, including potentially sensitive subjects. We will also be discussing political and cultural topics from a variety of perspectives. In this class, we support the open presentation and discussion of viewpoints, even those we don't like or disagree with, and we will also be respectful of others' ideas. This course is a place to explore new ideas and to think through the complexities of these ideas.

Academic Honesty and Misconduct

As a student in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Iowa, you are expected to abide by the College's Code of Academic Honesty. According to the Code:

Honesty is an essential value of our academic community. You are here to learn, and learning depends upon hard work and academic honesty. Your instructors set high standards and expect you to do your very best, completing your work honestly. Any student who registers for courses in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has, in essence, agreed to the value of learning and thus to the importance of the College's Code of Academic Honesty.

Code offenses include cheating on exams and quizzes, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, willful misrepresentation, and facilitating academic misconduct of others. Academic misconduct is serious, and therefore, has serious consequences, which can impact your future.

Grade Allocation

Attendance: Required

- Attendance is required.
- This is a discussion-based course so being present and participating in class is key.
- Every student gets one “grace” absence from class. Each additional unexcused absence will result in an automatic 1/3 letter grade deduction from your course grade. For example, if you miss two classes, the highest grade you can earn is an A- and so on. Two late arrivals will count as one absence.

Participation: 40%

- Your participation grade will reflect assessment of your preparedness, cooperation, and contribution. Participation means completing the assigned readings and tasks on time, cooperation means working well with others, and contribution means adding value to class discussions and activities.

Short writing assignments: 40%

- We will have short writing assignments assigned throughout the semester. You will be given a prompt related to the topic and expected to turn in a 1-page response paper by the start of the next class.
- Response papers may require additional reading, viewing and listening to related content.

Presentation: 20%

- Students will give a final presentation on a relevant hoax, conspiracy theory, or example of misinformation not discussed in class.
- Presentations will involve research and presenting a multimedia presentation during the final two weeks of class.

Grading Scale

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|----|-------------|----|--------|----|-------------|
| A | 93% & above | B- | 80–82% | D+ | 67–69% |
| A- | 90–92% | C+ | 77–79% | D | 63–66% |
| B+ | 87–89% | C | 73–76% | D- | 60–62% |
| B | 83–86% | C- | 70–72% | F | 59% & below |

Course Scheduleⁱ

In addition to the assigned readings from *Blur*, each week we will explore relevant cases and examples related to the topic. Additional reading/viewing/listening material will be assigned in advance and posted on ICON.

Week 1, 8/22: Course Introduction

What are hoaxes, conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns and why should we care?

Week 2, 8/29: Misinformation in Context

Read *Blur* chapters 1 and 2

History and context of hoaxes, conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns

Week 3, 9/5: Skepticism and Critical Thinking

Read *Blur* chapter 3

Week 4, 9/12: Assessing Completeness

Read *Blur* chapter 4

Week 5, 9/19: Understanding Sources

Read *Blur* chapter 5

Week 6, 9/26: Evaluating Evidence

Read *Blur* chapters 6 and 7

Week 7, 10/3: How to Find News that “Matters”

Read *Blur* chapter 8

Week 8, 10/10: Going Forward

Read *Blur* chapter 9, Epilogue and Afterword

Week 9, 10/17: Final presentations

Week 10, 10/24: Final presentations and course wrap up

ⁱ Schedule subject to change. You will be given advance notice of any changes. You are expected to read/listen/watch assigned material by the start of class unless otherwise indicated.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Policies and Resources

Administrative Home

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) is the administrative home of this course and governs its add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other policies. These policies vary by college (<https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook>).

Electronic Communication

Students are responsible for official correspondences sent to their UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for all communication within UI ([Operations Manual, III.15.2](#)).

Accommodations for Disabilities

UI is committed to an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (such as mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related condition) by registering with Student Disability Services (SDS). The student should then discuss accommodations with the course instructor (<https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/>).

Nondiscrimination in the Classroom

UI is committed to making the classroom a respectful and inclusive space for all people irrespective of their gender, sexual, racial, religious or other identities. Toward this goal, students are invited to optionally share their preferred names and pronouns with their instructors and classmates. The University of Iowa prohibits discrimination and harassment against individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, and other identity categories set forth in the University's Human Rights policy. For more information, contact the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity at diversity@uiowa.edu or diversity.uiowa.edu.

Academic Integrity

All undergraduates enrolled in courses offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's [Code of Academic Honesty](#). Misconduct is reported to the College, resulting in suspension or other sanctions, with sanctions communicated with the student through the UI email address.

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final exam schedule for each semester is announced around the fifth week of classes; students are responsible for knowing the date, time, and place of a final exam. Students should not make travel plans until knowing this final exam information. No exams of any kind are allowed the week before finals. (<https://clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/teaching-policies-resources-examination-policies>.)

Making a Complaint

Students with a complaint should first visit with the instructor or course supervisor and then with the departmental executive officer (DEO), also known as the Chair. Students may then bring the concern to CLAS (<https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/student-rights-responsibilities>).

Understanding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment must be reported immediately. For assistance, definitions, and the full University policy, see <https://osmrc.uiowa.edu/>.