

Department of Sociology · Johns Hopkins University
Spring, 2022

Knowledge, Evidence, and Democracy (AS.130.250)

Mondays, 1:30 – 4:00 pm, Maryland 201

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Office Hours: Mondays, 10:30 am – 12:00 noon; Thursdays, 2:00-3:30 pm; or by appointment

Course Overview

Fake news. Alternative facts. Follow the science. Misinformation. Disinformation. How can we understand the role of information, evidence, and scientific inquiry in politics? Where does information come from? How is it used? How can evidence, argument, and listening improve public conversations? This seminar will examine the connections between information, knowledge, evidence, and democracy, focusing mostly on the United States but with global examples as well.

Readings and Resources

Required Books

Hayot, Eric, Anatoly Detwyler, and Lea Pao, eds. *Information: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018.

Pomerantsev, Peter. *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. New York: Public Affairs, 2019.

Supplementary Readings

All additional readings are available either on the web or on the course website. The course website is available through <http://blackboard.jhu.edu>.

As this is a collaborative seminar on a current topic, we will decide together on specific topics and readings for the last third of the course.

Other Resources

Have a **dictionary** close at hand to look up words you don't know. You can find an adequate one at <http://www.dictionary.com> if you prefer using an online version.

The **Writing Center** (<https://krieger.jhu.edu/writingcenter/>) can help you with writing clearly and correctly.

There is an astonishing amount of information available on the World Wide Web. A significant proportion of that information—though by no means all—is true and relevant. By all means, use the Web to supplement your reading and knowledge, but use it critically and make sure you know the source of the information.

Assignments

Discussion Participation (40%). Participate in all class discussions, asking good questions, making good claims, raising good ideas, and listening well and respectfully to others. You will receive your first participation grade (10%) on Friday, February 18, covering January 24-February 14; your second (15%) on Friday, March 25, covering February 21-March 14; and your third (15%) at the end of the class, covering March 28-April 25.

Proposal Paper (20%). This short (approximately 1,000 words) paper raises an important question about the theory, ethics, or empirics of knowledge, information, and democracy. It should provide the background and justification for a further, systematic investigation of the question. Due Wednesday, February 23, at midnight.

Final Paper (40%). This paper (which serves as your final examination as well) is a substantial, academic investigation of an important question about the theory, ethics, or empirics of knowledge, information, and democracy. There is no specific length requirement, but approximately 2,500-3,000 words is a good guideline. In the absence of a compelling reason otherwise, you should plan to use the question raised in your proposal paper as the foundation for your final paper. Due Thursday, May 12, at midnight.

Adequate completion of the requirements of an assignment will earn you a B-. Work whose quality clearly exceeds these requirements will earn a B, B+, A-, or A. Work whose quality is in one or more ways less than adequate will earn you a grade of C+ or below.

Course Policies

All topics and readings are subject to change. This is a collaborative seminar in an fast-moving area. I've reserved the last two class sessions for us to decide together what topics to focus on. For all the other sessions, we may decide to change the topic or the readings depending on the class's collective interests. Any changes will be discussed in class and announced via email and Blackboard at least one week in advance.

COVID-19. You must follow all Johns Hopkins guidelines and requirements regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes consistent use of an appropriate mask, routine testing, and isolating upon a positive test. Check <https://covidinfo.jhu.edu/> for up-to-date policy

requirements and information. If necessary, we will set up Zoom links to allow participation if you are isolated or quarantined.

You are an adult. As a student in this class, you are provided with a set of resources for learning the class's contents, and you are expected to fulfill a series of requirements designed to evaluate the depth and breadth of your knowledge of those contents. Your grade, therefore, is a reflection of your success in utilizing the resources you have at your disposal. There will be no extra credit or make-up assignments. You are responsible for the information in the readings and given during lectures. If you do not understand something I say in a lecture, ask me during the lecture, during a later class, or privately via e-mail or office hours.

Participation in discussions and class activities is mandatory. Some discussions will be full-class; others will be in small groups. Your participation will be useless—and graded as such—if you have not done the reading.

Assignments are due on the dates listed. In exceptional cases, I may grant an extension; you must discuss this with me in advance. Make sure you give yourself sufficient time to finish assignments by their due dates. You will lose roughly one letter grade per day between the due date and the date the paper is received. You may make the calculation yourself as to whether your work will improve sufficiently in the extra time to make up for the grade reduction.

Your participation in this course is covered by the **Homewood Undergraduate Academic Policy** (<https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/undergrad-ethics/>). I take academic dishonesty—including, but not limited to, plagiarism—very seriously. There will be no excuses or second chances; if you have plagiarized the ideas or words of someone else without giving credit, you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have questions as to what constitutes academic dishonesty, check <https://guides.library.jhu.edu/avoidingplagiarism/home> or consult a TA or me.

Course Schedule

Monday, January 24 – Introduction to the Seminar

Monday, January 31 – What is knowledge? What is evidence? How do they work?

Readings: Shannon, from *A Mathematical Theory of Communication (Information)*
Poovey, from *A History of the Modern Fact (Information)*
Hayek, from “The Use of Knowledge in Society” (*Information*)
McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, Ch. 1-2

Monday, February 7 – Models of Democracy

Readings: Federalist Papers 10, 23, 51, 55
Tocqueville, “On the Philosophical Method of the Americans” (V2, Part 1, Chapter 1, *Democracy in America*)
Rogers, “Democracy is a Habit: Practice It”
The Sharon Statement

The Port Huron Statement

Monday, February 14 – Misinformation and Propaganda

Visiting discussant: Peter Pomerantsev

Reading: Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda*, entire

Monday, February 21 – Misinformation, Disinformation, and Error

Readings:

McIntyre, Post-Truth, Ch. 5-7

Shannon C. McGregor and Daniel Kreiss. “Americans are Too Worried about Political Misinformation.” *Slate* October 30, 2020.

<https://slate.com/technology/2020/10/misinformation-social-media-election-research-fear.html>

Mohsen Mosleh, Cameron Martel, Dean Eckles, and David Rand. 2021. Perverse Downstream Consequences of Debunking: Being Corrected by Another User for Posting False Political News Increases Subsequent Sharing of Low Quality, Partisan, and Toxic Content in a Twitter Field Experiment. In Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 182, 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445642>

Schultz, “The bright side of wrong: Our tendency to err is also what makes us smart. Here’s what we’d gain from embracing it.” Boston Globe 2010.

http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/06/13/the_bright_side_of_wrong/

Wednesday, February 23 – Proposal Paper due at midnight

Monday, February 28 – Arguing in Public

Visiting discussant:

Christian Lundberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Communication, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Readings:

Popper, Selections from *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*

Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, section III (The Layout of Arguments)

Marten Scheffer, Ingrid van de Leemput, Els Weinans, Johan Bollen. “The Rise and Fall of Rationality in Language.” *PNAS* 118:51 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2107848118>

Monday, March 7 – Misinformation

Readings:

Mosleh, Mohsen, and David G. Rand. “Falsehood In, Falsehood Out: Measuring Exposure to Elite Misinformation on Twitter.” PsyArXiv, 11 Sept. 2021.

Web. <https://psyarxiv.com/ye3pf/>

Ecker, U.K.H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. *et al.* The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction. *Nat Rev Psychol* 1, 13–29 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y>

Deen Freelon & Chris Wells (2020) "Disinformation as Political Communication." *Political Communication*, 37:2, 145-156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>

Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, ch. 4, 6, 8

Monday, March 14 - Science and Democracy I

Visiting Discussant:

H. Holden Thorp, Ph.D., Editor-in-Chief, *Science*

Readings:

Ophir, Yotam, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "The Effects of Media Narratives about Failures and Discoveries in Science on Beliefs About and Support For Science." *Public Understanding of Science* 30:8 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211012630>

Altenmüller, Marlene Sophie, Stephan Nuding, and Mario Gollwitzer. "No Harm in Being Self-Corrective: Self-Criticism and Reform Intentions Increase Researchers' Epistemic Trustworthiness and Credibility in the Eyes of the Public." *Public Understanding of Science* 30, no. 8 (November 2021): 962–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211022181>.

Naomi Oreskes. "Science and public policy: what's proof got to do with it?" *Environmental Science and Policy* 7:5 (2004). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2004.06.002>

Thorp, H. Holden. "Stick to Science." *Science*, 2020

Thorp, H. Holden. "Persuasive Words are Not Enough" *Science*, 2020

Thorp, H. Holden. "It's Not as Easy as it Looks" *Science*, 2021

Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "How Conspiracists Exploited COVID-19 Science." *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (2021). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01217-2>

Monday, March 21 – Spring break

Monday, March 28 - Science and Democracy II

Readings:

Jasanoff, "A New Climate for Society," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2010

Jasanoff, "Technologies of Humility." *Nature* 31 Oct 2007. <https://www.nature.com/articles/450033a>

Alondra Nelson and Jane Lubchenco, "Strengthening scientific integrity." *SCIENCE* • 11 Jan 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abo0036>

Monday, April 4 – Expression, Identity, Voice, Narrative: Alternative Warrants?

Readings:

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. "Race is Always the Issue." *Atlantic* September 17, 2015.

"A Letter on Justice and Open Debate." *Harpers* July 7, 2020.

<https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>

"A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate." *The Objective* July 10, 2020.

<https://objectivejournalism.org/2020/07/a-more-specific-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>

Meenakshi Gigi Durham, On the Relevance of Standpoint Epistemology to the Practice of Journalism: The Case for "Strong Objectivity", *Communication Theory*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 1 May 1998, Pages 117–140,

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1998.tb00213.x>

Parker, Patricia, Dorothy Holland, Jean Dennison, Sara H. Smith, and Melvin Jackson. "Decolonizing the Academy: Lessons From the Graduate Certificate in Participatory Research at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill." *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 7 (September 2018): 464–77.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417729846>

Monday, April 11 – Can Technology Save Us?

Readings:

Google Research. The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Data

<https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/research.google.com/en//pubs/archive/35179.pdf>

Christopher A. Bail, Lisa P. Argyle, Taylor W. Brown, John

P. Bumpus, Haohan Chen, M. B. Fallin Hunzaker, Jaemin Lee, Marcus Mann, Friedolin Merhout, Alexander Volfovsky. "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization." *PNAS* 115:37 (September 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>

Anastasia Kozyreva, Stephan Lewandowsky, Ralph Hertwig. "Citizens Versus the Internet: Confronting Digital Challenges With Cognitive Tools." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 21:3 (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1529100620946707>

Monday, April 18 – Reserved for future topics

Monday, April 25 – Reserved for future topics

Thursday, May 12 – Final Paper due at midnight