GOV 94jp: Democracy and Misinformation
Fall 2022
Wednesdays, 3 p.m.-5 p.m.

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 1 p.m.-3 p.m. or by appointment.

Course Site  https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/110510

Course Description

Why do false beliefs flourish in democratic politics? What problems do they pose for democracy and the values that undergird it? Are they a cause of the United States’ dysfunction or a symptom of deeper rot? This course draws connections across political theory, empirical social science, and epistemology to place American democracy’s “epistemic crisis” in broader normative and philosophical context. Our goal will be to look beyond social media and partisan demagogues to investigate the dynamics that make false beliefs so pervasive in public life. The relationship between inequality and misinformation will receive special emphasis. While the course focuses on the United States, we will develop resources for evaluating the challenge of misinformation in democracies around the world.

The course is organized in four parts. The first aims to clarify the scope of misinformation in the United States and its democratic consequences. The second investigates how social networks give rise to shared beliefs and the epistemic effects of polarization, corporate power, and distrust. The third looks at how social identity affects our vulnerability to misinformation, with a focus on racial inequality. The course concludes by exploring normative questions surrounding efforts to correct the spread of misinformation at both the individual and polity-wide level.

Assignments and Grading

This course emphasizes discussion and debate. You are required to come to class having done the reading assigned for that day and to draw on it in classroom inquiry. What’s important is quality, not quantity, of participation – comments must constructively engage with the readings or the arguments of your peers to count toward your participation grade.

- **In-class participation** will make up 20% of your final grade.

For each session (starting Week II), I’ll ask you to submit a brief reading response to Canvas by 1 p.m. Wednesday. These should be short paragraphs (3-4 sentences) that use the texts to motivate and pose a question for further discussion or research. Each session, two students will be assigned the role of discussion leader and will share their question in a brief (2-3 minute) presentation.

- **Reading responses** will make up 10% of your final grade.
This course’s practical focus is in developing your analytic writing skills by learning to make and rigorously defend arguments. Written assignments will be of two types.

**Three argumentative papers (3-5 pages):** these papers ask you to develop your own arguments about the course material by identifying key themes that run across texts, juxtaposing explanations, or identifying gaps or weaknesses in writers’ reasoning.

- **Each paper** will constitute **10%** of your grade.

**Final seminar paper (15-20 pages):** your research paper will be on a topic of your choosing related to the course material. Ahead of writing your paper, you will submit a short (1-2 page) proposal that lays out your research question and intuitions about your argument. These can be submitted any time after October 19 but are due by the last day of class. Once submitted, you are required attend office hours to discuss your proposal, address any concerns, and clarify your evidence.

- **The final paper** will make up **40%** of your grade.

Late assignments will be docked one-third of a letter grade per 24 hours. However, life is busy, and I am happy to accommodate you so that you can write the best papers you can. If you need an extension, reach out to me no later than 48 hours in advance of the deadline to develop a plan for prompt submission.

**Attendance**

Attendance is mandatory. If you are unable to make a session for a foreseen reason, please send documented rationale no later than 48 hours before class. In case of an emergency, notify me as soon as possible. Requests for excused absences will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Unexcused absences will result in a significant penalty to your participation grade.

Laptops and other electronic devices are permitted in class to access the readings. However, if they prove to be a distraction from discussion, I will forbid them.

**Note on Participation**

Participation is never easy. While our goal is to think through difficult questions carefully and rigorously, you should see your passions and lived experiences as fodder for inquiry. As a class, our goal should be to create a space where we all feel comfortable being vulnerable, taking risks, and challenging one another, regardless of background or normative commitments.

To do that, I expect:

- You listen respectfully to one another while speaking.
- When you join in, you engage your peers’ comments on their own terms and in context – not simply put forward your own analysis.
• You will be sensitive to the human stakes at play. Our discussions will touch on difficult topics like mass violence and racial oppression. Your peers may be personally affected by the subject matter. Deep disagreements are likely to surface. All of these should be navigated with care.
• You will refrain from opining on contemporary partisan politics and draw on current events only in relation to core questions and themes raised by the readings.
• You will be conscientious about who is being heard and unheard.

A critical challenge will be learning to talk about bitterly contested political issues in a way that is respectful both of each other and of people who see the world in a profoundly different way than us. Demeaning or belittling language will not be tolerated. Rather, we will cultivate the capacity for deliberating with and about persons as equals. This will not come easy. Conversations may, whatever speakers’ intentions, cause you offense or make you uncomfortable sharing your views. If this becomes the case, I encourage you to reach out to discuss the problem and how to best move forward.

Collaboration and Citation Policy

Political theory is collaborative. You are encouraged to discuss your ideas for assignments with your classmates and to find useful insights from your conversations. But all written work must be your own. If you received any formal feedback on your writing (either from your peers or resources like the Writing Center), you should identify those you consulted at the top of the submitted assignment. All ideas, findings, and quotes must be cited properly. The Harvard Guide to Using Sources is an invaluable resource. You may use your preferred citation format, but you must use it consistently.

Course Readings

This is an empirically ground course in political theory. Our discussions will focus on the conceptual and normative questions raised by debates about misinformation in advanced democracies. Readings include selections from political science, social epistemology, communications research, philosophy of science, and legal scholarship as well as political theory proper. They have been chosen to expose you to the breadth of recent thinking on misinformation and to give you practice reading and finding connections across disciplinary styles. The recency of most readings emphasizes that none should be considered a definitive or final statement.

Assigned reading ranges between 70 to 150 pages a week, though those pages vary in their density. You are not required to purchase any books for this course. Digital versions of all the required readings are available online through the Canvas site or Hollis. We read significant portions of the following books, which you may wish to purchase for yourself:

Course Overview

I. What’s (The Matter With) Misinformation?
   September 7: Democracy’s Misinformation Problem
   September 14: Conspiracy Theories
   September 21: Democratic Values and the Public Sphere

II. Epistemic Communities
    September 28: How Networks Shape Knowledge
    Paper I Due October 2
    October 5: Scientific Communities
    October 12: Epistemic Dependence and Distrust

III. Identity and Ignorance
    October 19: Partisan Hearts and Minds
    October 26: Speech, Power, and Social Consciousness
    Paper II Due October 30
    November 2: Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance

IV. The Politics of the Public Sphere
    November 9: Is Misinformation Protected Speech?
    November 16: Social Media, Search Engines, and the New Gatekeepers
    Paper III Due November 27
    November 30: Public Policy and Private Virtues

Final Paper Proposal Due November 30
Final Paper Due TBD

Schedule of Readings

September 7: Democracy’s Misinformation Problem

- Andrew M. Guess and Benjamin A. Lyons. 2020. “Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda.”
September 14: Conspiracy Theories

- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum. 2020. A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy, Chap. 1-2, 4-6, Conclusion

September 21: Democratic Values and the Public Sphere

- Walter Lippmann. 1922. Public Opinion, Chap. 1, 14-15

September 28: How Networks Shape Knowledge

- Sanford C. Goldberg. 2021. “Fake News and Epistemic Rot; or, Why We Are All in This Together”

Paper I Due October 2

October 5: Scientific Communities

- Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall. 2019. The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread, Chap. 1-3

October 12: Epistemic Dependence and Distrust

• Rose Jacobs. 2021. “The Downfall (and Possible Salvation) of Expertise”

October 19: Partisan Hearts and Minds

• Chloe Wittenberg and Adam J. Berinsky. 2020. “Misinformation and Its Correction.”
• Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis. 2022. “Gaslighting Citizens.”
• Alex Worsnip. 2021. “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media”

October 26: Speech, Power, and Social Consciousness

• Jason Stanley. 2015. How Propaganda Works, Chap. 2-4
• LaFleur Stephens-Dougan. 2020. Race to the Bottom: How Racial Appeals Work in America, Chap. 1

Paper II Due October 30

November 2: Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance

• Charles Mills. 2007. “White Ignorance.”
November 9: Is Misinformation Protected Speech?


November 16: Social Media, Search Engines, and the New Gatekeepers


November 23: No Class

Paper III Due November 27

November 30: Public Policy and Private Virtues

- Rebecca Kern. 2022. “Push to rein in social media sweeps the states.”
- Daniel Funke and Daniella Flammini. 2020. “A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world.” France, Germany, India, Taiwan

Final Paper Proposal Due November 30
Final Paper Due TBA