

FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION, AND POST-TRUTH POLITICS

Senior Seminar

POLS 4600-003, MW, 2:30pm - 3:45pm. Fretwell 406.

January 4, 2023



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This syllabus is intended to give the student guidance in what may be covered during the semester. However, the policies, assignments and readings contained in this syllabus are subject to change with advance notice.

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Course Description

“Fake news” has captured the attention of politicians, the media, and the general public since 2016. While the phenomenon is not new to social and political discourse, the complexity of the Internet media environment has increased the difficulty of evaluating information quality. This course will survey academic studies in political communication and public opinion that analyze how individuals consume false political information in the US and around the world. The course will conclude by discussing the possible policy solutions to combat the spread of fake news. By the end of the semester you will: (1) identify and distinguish between different types of political misinformation; (2) identify and describe the causes and consequences of political misinformation; (3) identify and evaluate the different policy solutions to combat misinformation, and; (4) write and present a policy brief proposing a specific strategy to fight misinformation.

General Education Requirement: POLS 4600 satisfies part of the General Education requirement for Goal IV (Communication) as a Writing Intensive (W) and Oral Communication (O) course. This goal states that UNC Charlotte graduates should be able to effectively send and receive in English written messages in different situations for a variety of audiences, purposes and subjects.

Course Material

The course will rely on articles and book chapters. All of the material will be provided to the students through Canvas.

Evaluation

Class Attendance/Participation	10%
Weekly (W) Assignments (5 points each)	60%
Policy Brief	
- Video Presentation (O)	10%
- Final Policy Brief (W)	20%

Grading Scale

90-100	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
59 and below	F

Class Attendance/Participation

Students are expected to read the papers prior to class and be prepared to discuss them. The class will follow a seminar format in which class participation is not only encouraged but also required. Needless to say that no attendance means no participation.

Students are expected to attend every class and remain in class for the duration of the session when it is safe to do so in accordance with university guidance regarding COVID-19. Failure to attend class or arriving late may impact your ability to achieve course objectives which could affect your course grade. An absence, excused or unexcused, does not relieve a student of any course requirement. Regular class attendance is a student's obligation, as is a responsibility for all the work of class meetings, including tests and written tasks. Any unexcused absence or excessive tardiness may result in a loss of participation points. Students are encouraged to work directly with their instructors regarding their absence(s). For absences related to COVID-19, please adhere to the following:

- **Complete your Niner Health Check each morning.**
- **Do not come to class if you are sick.** Please protect your health and the health of others by staying home. Contact your healthcare provider if you believe you are ill.
- **If you are sick:** If you test positive or are evaluated by a healthcare provider for symptoms of COVID-19, indicate so on your Niner Health Check to alert the University. Submit a copy of your Niner Health Check notification email to your instructors. Upon learning that you have tested positive or have been diagnosed for symptoms of COVID-19, either from your reporting or from Student health Center testing or diagnosis, representatives from Emergency Management and/or the Student Health Center will follow up with you, and your instructors will be notified of the need for accommodations, as necessary.
- **If you have been exposed** to COVID-19 positive individuals and/or have been notified to self-quarantine due to exposure, indicate so on your Niner Health Check to alert the University. Representatives from Emergency Management and/or the Student Health Center will follow up with you as necessary. Submit a copy of your Niner Health Check notification email to your instructors. If you need any additional support verifying your absence after you have communicated with your professors, contact Student Assistance and Support Services.

To return to class after being absent due to a period of **self-quarantine**, students should submit a copy of their Niner Health Check clearance email to their instructor(s). To return to class after being absent due to a COVID-19 **diagnosis**, students should submit an online request form to Student Assistance and Support Services (SASS). Supporting documentation can be attached directly to the request form and should be from a student's health care provider or the Student Health Center, clearly indicating the dates of absences and the date the student is able to return to class. Instructors will be notified of such absences.

If you are absent from class as a result of a COVID-19 diagnosis or quarantine, as instructor I will work with you to help you continue to make progress in the course. The final decision for approval of all absences and missed work is determined by the instructor.

Weekly Assignments

I will post Canvas assignments on a weekly basis for 12 weeks of the course. The assignments must be completed by Monday before class and will inform the content of that day's discussion. The

activities will include quizzes, analyses of news and headlines, among other things. The last five assignments (weeks 9 to 13) will be related to the final policy brief in order to encourage early reflection and development on the final policy brief.

Policy Brief

Each student is expected to submit a policy brief (10-15 pages) discussing and operationalizing a specific strategy to solve the problem of fake news. Each student will also give a 5/10-minute in-class presentation of their proposal in Week 14. The solutions proposed in the policy brief may involve one of the four strategies: 1) effective fact-checking; 2) media literacy campaign/educational program; 3) fact-checking of politicians, and; 4) internet platform regulation. We will cover these topics in class during the course, but students are encouraged to select their topic and search for the relevant materials in advance. We will also have one-on-one instruction to discuss both assignments during Week 7. Students are also encouraged to talk to instructor early in the semester about their proposals. The last four weekly assignments will focus on the early writing stages of the policy brief. I will post examples to help students understand the task. The written assignment is due on May 8 by midnigt, and students are allowed to submit them before the deadline if they prefer to do so.

Administrative Policies

Course Website and Email

The course website can be accessed through Canvas. Please check this site regularly for readings, assignments, and other updates. Announcements may be sent out via email or posted directly on Canvas. You are responsible for all information disseminated via Canvas and/or email. If you send me an email on a weekday, I will respond to you that same day. If you send me an email on a weekend or holiday, I will respond to you the following business day.

Attendance

Students are expected to attend every class and remain in class for the duration of the session when it is safe to do so in accordance with university guidance regarding COVID-19. Failure to attend class or arriving late may impact your ability to achieve course objectives which could affect your course grade. An absence, excused or unexcused, does not relieve a student of any course requirement. Regular class attendance is a student's obligation, as is a responsibility for all the work of class meetings, including tests and written tasks. Any unexcused absence or excessive tardiness may result in a loss of participation points.

Academic Integrity

Each student in this course is expected to abide by the UNC Charlotte Code of Student Academic Integrity. In short, this means that cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students violating the

Academic Honesty Policy in this course will receive a minimum penalty of a grade of zero for the assignment or test in question and may receive an “F” in the course and referral to Judicial Services.

Students with Disabilities

UNC Charlotte is committed to ensuring equal academic opportunities and inclusion for students with disabilities based on the principles of independent living, accessible universal design and diversity. Students with disabilities who anticipate needing an academic accommodation in this course should provide me with the proper documentation from the Disability Services Center within the first week of class.

Diversity

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte is committed to equality of educational opportunity and does not discriminate against applicants, students, or employees based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, or disability. In keeping with this commitment, UNC Charlotte actively seeks to promote diversity in its educational environment through its recruitment, enrollment, and hiring practices.

Courtesy in Classroom

All students are required to abide by the UNC Charlotte Sexual Harassment Policy and the policy on Responsible Use of University Computing and Electronic Communication Resources. Sexual harassment, as defined in the UNC Charlotte Sexual Harassment Policy, is prohibited, even when carried out through computers or other electronic communications systems, including course-based chat rooms or message boards.

COVID-19 Policies

It is the current policy of UNC Charlotte that as a condition of on-campus enrollment, all students are required to engage in safe behaviors to avoid the spread of COVID-19 in the 49er community. Such behaviors specifically include the requirement that all students properly wear CDC-compliant face coverings in all indoor spaces on campus, including classrooms and labs, **regardless of vaccination status**. Failure to comply with this policy in the classroom or lab may result in dismissal from the current class session. If the student refuses to leave the classroom or lab after being dismissed, the student may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity for charges under the Code of Student Responsibility.

Title IX Reporting Policy

UNC Charlotte is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these incidents, know that you are not alone. UNC Charlotte has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations,

helping with civil protective orders, and more. Please be aware that all UNC Charlotte employees, including faculty members, are expected to relay any information or reports of sexual misconduct they receive to the Title IX Coordinator. This means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, I am expected to report the information to the Title IX Coordinator. Although I am expected to report the situation, you will still have options about how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. Our goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and have access to the resources you need. If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can contact the following on-campus resources, who are not required to report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator: (1) University Counseling Center (counselingcenter.uncc.edu, 7-0311); or (2) Student Health Center (studenthealth.uncc.edu, 7-7400). Additional information about your options is also available at titleix.uncc.edu under the “Students” tab.

FERPA Notification

In establishing University Policy 402, Student Education Records, UNC Charlotte adheres to a policy of compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, also known as FERPA, a federal law that affords students the following rights with respect to their education records. For details, see the FERPA Annual Notification posted on the Office of Legal Affairs website. All questions concerning this FERPA Annual Notification may be directed to the attention of the Office of the Registrar.

Food Insecurity Statement

Food insecurity is defined by the USDA as “a lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” Food insecure categories include: reduced caloric intake, reduced food quality, lack of variety in diet, disrupted eating patterns, and hunger. Research shows that college students experience food insecurity at higher rates than the American household rate, and that food insecurity can negatively impact academic performance and persistence. In recognition of this problem, UNC Charlotte offers assistance to students facing food insecurity through an on- campus food pantry. The Jamil Niner Student Pantry (JNSP) is located on the east edge of campus at 1224 John Kirk Road. It has regular hours which may change from semester to semester; please see the website at <https://ninerpantry.uncc.edu/> for schedule and details on its services, as well as resources about hunger and food insecurity among college students.

Course Schedule

This schedule is a guide for the course and is subject to change at my discretion with appropriate notice. Please read or listen to the assigned readings or podcasts before the session for which they are listed below.

Weeks 0 and 1: MISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY



Wednesday, January 11, 2023: Introduction and Course Overview

In this session, instructor and students will get to know each other and overview the course, especially the most important document in the world: the one you are currently reading.

No Readings

Wednesday, January 18, 2023: Misinformation and Democracy

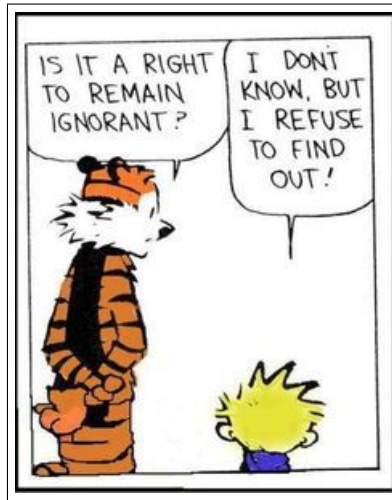
How pervasive are “fake news?” Why are “fake news” so concerning in politics? Why does it matter for democracy?

Readings:

- Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. (2017). “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31 (2), 211-236.
- Mounk, Y. (2018). *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Harvard Univrsty Press. (Chapter 4)

No Canvas Assignment

Week 2: WHAT DO PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT POLITICS?



Monday, January 23, 2023: Does Knowledge Matter?

What is the extent of political knowledge among the public? And what are the effects of political information and misinformation on opinions and behaviors?

Readings:

- Hochschild, J., & Einstein, K. (2015). *Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics*. University of Oklahoma Press. (Chapters 1 and 2).

Wednesday, January 25, 2023: Facts and Interpretation

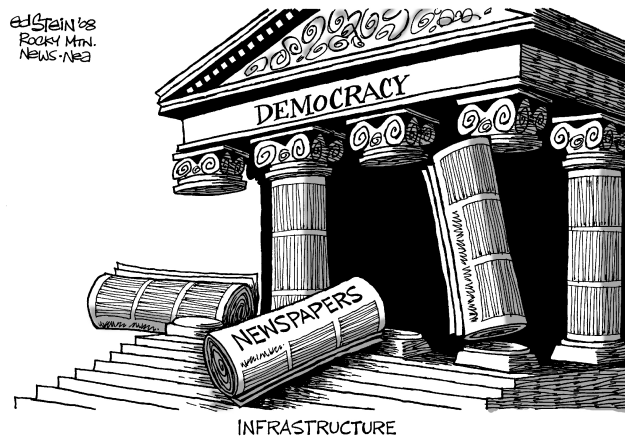
Different people may use the same piece of accurate factual information in opposing ways. Why? And why does it matter?

Readings:

- Gaines, B. et al. (2007). "Same facts, different interpretations: Partisan motivation and opinion on Iraq." *The Journal of Politics*, 69 (4), 957-974.

Canvas Assignment 1: Political Knowledge Task (5 pts)

Week 3: DO MAINSTREAM MEDIA MISINFORM?



Monday, January 30, 2023: Mainstream Media Effects

How do mainstream media operate in the information market? How does it influence people?

Readings:

- McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-Truth*. MIT Press. (Chapter 4).
- Khaldarova, I. and Pantti, M. (2016). "Fake news: The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict." *Journalism Practice*, 10 (7), 891-901.

Wednesday, February 1, 2023: Fake News or Media Bias?

To what extent does mainstream media misinform? How often do people mistake partisan coverage by fake news?

Readings:

- CommGAP. *Media Effects*. The World Bank.
- van der Linden, S. et al. (2020). "You are fake news: political bias in perceptions of fake news." *Media, Culture & Society*, 42 (3), 460-470.

Canvas Assignment 2: Media Bias Exercise (5 pts)

Week 4: INTERNET AND MISINFORMATION



Monday, February 6, 2023: Media Choice

The informational market has changed substantially since the popularization of cable and then the internet. What are the effects of that process on public opinion?

Readings:

- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 2).

Wednesday, February 8, 2023: Internet and Misinformation

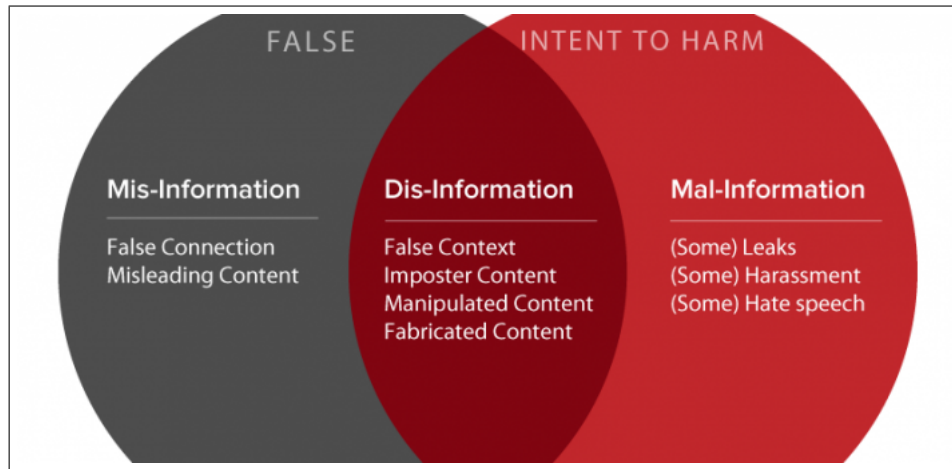
What makes online environments prone to the spread of misinformation? What are the consequences for public opinion?

Readings:

- McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-Truth*. MIT Press. (Chapter 5).
- Cacciatore, M. (2018). "Is Facebook Making Us Dumber? Exploring Social Media Use as a Predictor of Political Knowledge." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95 (2), 404-424.

Canvas Assignment 3: True-or-False Quiz (5 pts)

Week 5: MISINFORMATION: TYPES



Monday, February 13, 2023: Types of Deception

Is all false information equal? What are the types of false information that can deceive people in politics?

Readings:

- Tandoc Jr., E., et al. (2018). "Defining 'Fake News': A Typology of Scholarly Definitions." *Digital Journalism*, 6 (2), 137-153.
- Hendricks, V. & Vestergaard, M. (2019). *Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation*. Springer Nature. (Chapter 4).

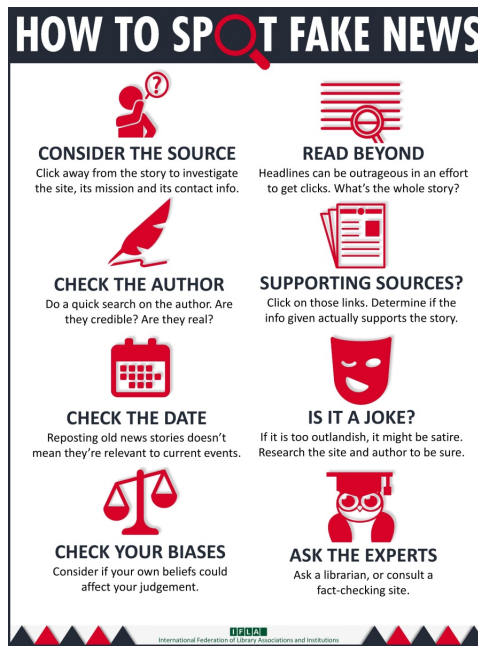
Wednesday, February 15, 2023: Is there more? What are some other relevant features associated with misinformation?

Readings:

- Horne, B. & Adali, S. (2017). "This just in: Fake news packs a lot in title, uses simpler, repetitive content in text body, more similar to satire than real news." *Eleventh international AAAI conference on web and social media*.
- Chen, X. et al. (2021). "What Makes News Sharable on Social Media?" *PsyArXiv*, 9 July 2021. Web.

Canvas Assignment 4: Types of Deception exercise (5 pts)

Week 6: HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS?



Monday, February 20, 2023: Guide on Identifying Fake News

How do information experts (journalists, librarians, among others) spot false information online? What are the strategies to do so?

Readings:

- Otis, C. (2020). *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News*. Feiwel & Friends. (Chapter 17).

Wednesday, February 22, 2023: Large-scale Misinformation Detection

How can we detect misinformation that is spread in larger scale?

Readings:

- Wu, L., et al. (2019). "Misinformation in social media: definition, manipulation, and detection." *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter*, 21 (2), 80-90.

-Batista Pereira, F., et al. (2023). "Detecting Misinformation: The Spread of False News by Political Leaders in the Global South." Working Paper.

Canvas Assignment 5: Fake news breakdown (5 pts)

SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS

February 27 and March 1, 2023



Do not come to class. Rest. And please enjoy your Spring break with moderation.

Week 7: POLICY BRIEF WEEK

March 6 and 8, 2023



During the two sessions of this week (Monday and Wednesday), students are required to visit the instructor during office hours to discuss their idea for the policy brief, as part of the weekly assignment.

Canvas Assignment 6: Policy Brief : Initial Ideas (5 pts)

Week 8: MISINFORMATION: CAUSES



Monday, March 13, 2023: Partisanship or Laziness?

Why do people fall for "fake news?" Is it partisanship, laziness, or what?

Readings:

- Flynn, D., et al. (2017). "The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics." *Political Psychology*, 38, 127-150.
- Pennycook, G. & Rand, D. (2019). "Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning." *Cognition*, 188, 39-50.

Wednesday, March 15, 2023: Do online environments contribute to the infodemic?

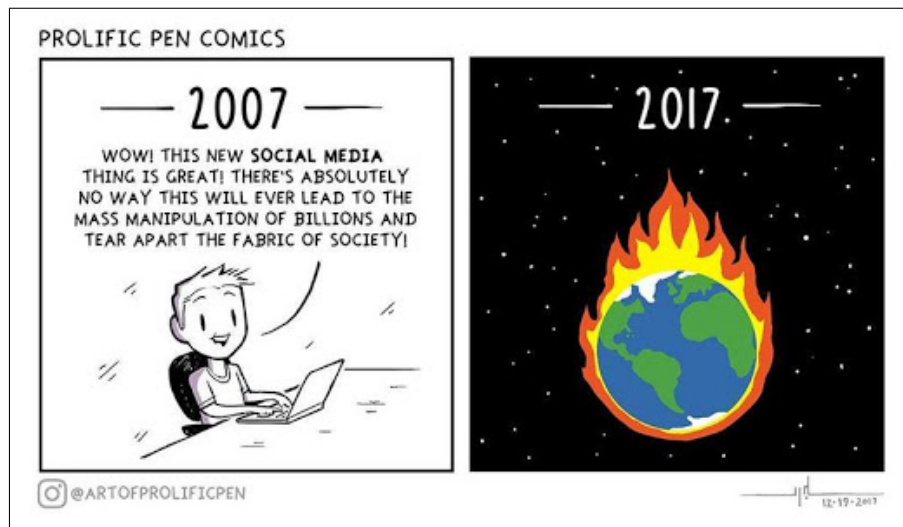
What is content recommendation and moderation? To what extent can platforms foster or prevent the spread of misinformation?

Readings:

- Shaffer, K. (2019). "Swimming Upstream: How Content Recommendation Engines Impact Information and Manipulate Our Attention." In: *Data versus Democracy* (pp. 31-44). Apress, Berkeley, CA.
- Théro, H. & Vincent, E. (2022). "Investigating Facebook's interventions against accounts that repeatedly share misinformation." *Information Processing & Management*, 59 (2), 102804.

Canvas Assignment 7: Another "true or false" quiz (5 pts)

Week 9: MISINFORMATION: CONSEQUENCES



Monday, March 20, 2023: Fake Opinions?

Do “fake news” really make people think differently about politics? What are some of the consequences of false information for the dynamics of public opinion?

Readings:

- Hochschild, J., & Einstein, K. (2015). *Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics*. University of Oklahoma Press. (Chapters 4 and 5)

Wednesday, March 22, 2023: Other Consequences?

Does misinformation affect people in ways other than the informational content of what they think?

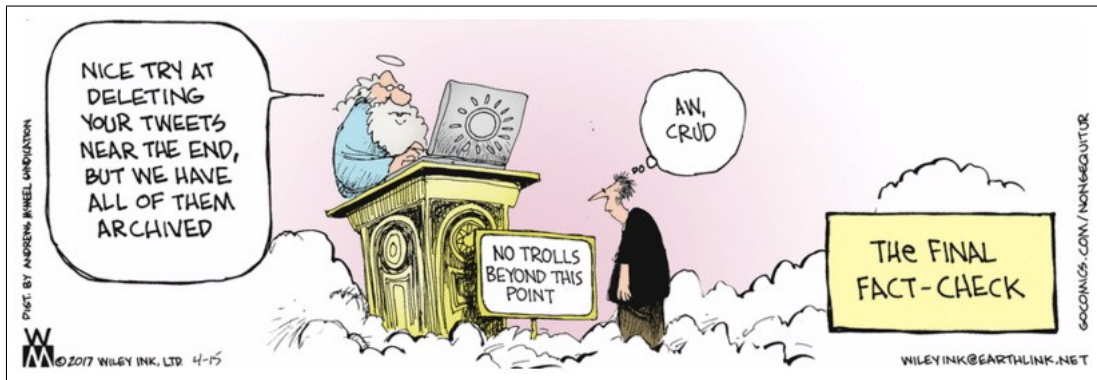
Readings:

- Guess, A. et al. (2020). “Fake news may have limited effects beyond increasing beliefs in false claims.” *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1 (1), 1-12.

- Imhoff, R., et al. (2021). “Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases nonnormative political engagement.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12 (1), 71-79.

Canvas Assignment 8: Video: how to write a policy brief (5 pts)

Week 10: FIGHTING MISINFORMATION: FACT-CHECKING



Monday, March 27, 2023: Overview of Solutions

In this session we will overview some of the most popular proposed solutions to solve the problem of misinformation.

Readings:

- West, D. (2017). "How to combat fake news and disinformation." *Brookings Report*. Brookings Institution (brookings.edu).

Wednesday, March 29, 2023: Fact-Checking

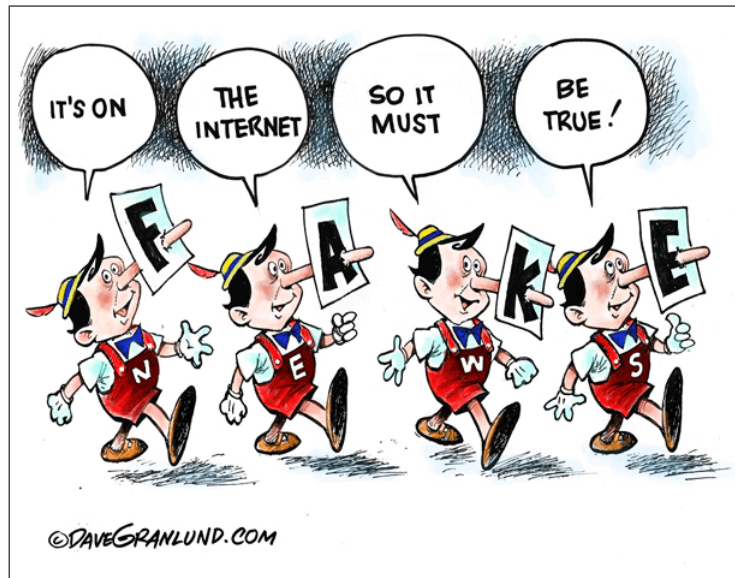
What is fact-checking? Is it effective in fighting misinformation?

Readings:

- Check out factcheck.org.
- Walter, N. et al. (2019) "Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom." *Political Communication*, 37 (3), 350-375.
- Allen, J. et al. (2021). "Scaling up fact-checking using the wisdom of crowds." *Science Advances*, 7 (36), eabf4393.

Canvas Assignment 9: Policy brief outline (5 pts)

Week 11: FIGHTING MISINFORMATION: EDUCATING THE PUBLIC



Monday, April 3, 2023: What is Media Literacy?

Can we teach people how to independently identify and reject false information?

Readings:

- Bulger, M. & Davidson, P. (2018). The Promises, Challenges, and Futures of Media Literacy. Data & Society Research Institute.

Wednesday, April 5, 2023: Does it work?

Do media literacy interventions make people less likely to accept misinformation?

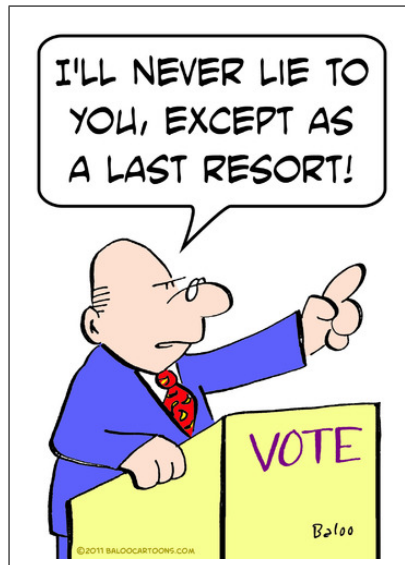
Readings:

- Guess, A. et al. (2020). "A Digital Media Literacy Intervention Increases Discernment Between Mainstream and False News in the United States and India." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117 (27), 15536-15545.

- Acerbi, A., et al. (2022). "Research note: Fighting misinformation or fighting for information?" *Research note: Fighting misinformation or fighting for information?*, 3 (1).

Canvas Assignment 10: Policy Brief "Problem Scope" and "Current policies" sections (5 pts)

Week 12: FIGHTING MISINFORMATION: WARNING POLITICIANS



Monday, April 10, 2023: Are Politicians the Problem?

To what extent elites are responsible for the spread of false political information? Is it possible to reduce the incentives that elites have to spread misinformation? How can we do that?

Readings:

- Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2015). "The effect of fact-checking on elites: A field experiment on US state legislators." *American Journal of Political Science*, 59 (3), 628-640.

Wednesday, April 12, 2023: Other Harms?

What are the other ways through which politicians can interfere in the dynamics of misinformation among the public?

Readings:

- Van Duyn, E., & Collier, J. (2019). "Priming and fake news: The effects of elite discourse on evaluations of news media." *Mass Communication and Society*, 22 (1), 29-48.

- Swire-Thompson, B. et al. (2020). "They Might Be a Liar But They're My Liar: Source Evaluation and the Prevalence of Misinformation." *Political Psychology*, 41 (1), 21-34.

Canvas Assignment 11: Policy Brief (near-complete) draft (5 pts)

Week 13: FIGHTING MISINFORMATION: REGULATION



Monday, April 17, 2023: Should we regulate the internet? No.

Readings:

- Harris, C. et al. (2009). "Truth, law and hate in the virtual marketplace of ideas: perspectives on the regulation of Internet content." *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 18 (2), 155-184.

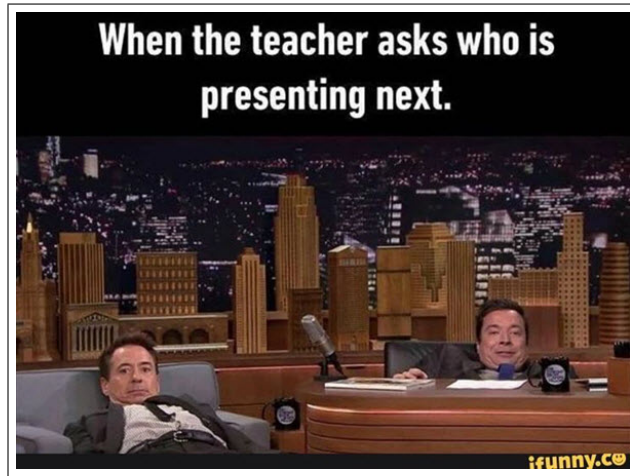
Wednesday, April 19, 2023: Should we regulate the internet? Yes (or maybe).

Readings:

- Flew, T. et al. (2019). "Internet regulation as media policy: Rethinking the question of digital communication platform governance." *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, 10 (1), 33-50.

Canvas Assignment 12: Video: Good Presentation vs. Bad Presentation (5 pts)

Week 14: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS



Monday, April 24, 2023: Student Presentations (3rd round)

Wednesday, April 26, 2023: Student Presentations (4th round)

No Canvas Assignment

May 8: FINAL POLICY BRIEF (20 pts) DUE ON CANVAS, by midnight