

Fake News in American History

Instructor: Jordan E. Taylor

Class meeting: M W 10:50 AM-12:05 PM (Eastern Time)

Office hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 4:00–5:00 PM (Eastern Time).

Course description

Since the 2016 election, the term “fake news” has become widespread. But is the phenomenon really new? This course will bring a historical perspective to bear on the modern problem of fake news. We will examine the history of media, fake news, and cultures of falsehood in order to better understand one of the most urgent problems of our present.

In both its content and assignments, this course is about the importance of evidence. The effective use of evidence is the foundation of historical thinking and strong argument-driven writing. Likewise, one’s ability to thoughtfully evaluate evidence is necessary for good digital citizenship and avoiding the traps of “fake news.”

Learning objectives

Education is a process, not an outcome. My goal is that we grow together in this course. Here are some objectives I have for the semester.

- Audience: Students will demonstrate a keen awareness of public audiences for their written work and will develop an aptitude for communicating with them.
- Revision: Students will hone their capacity to edit and revise their written work in response to constructive criticism.
- Information literacy: Students will develop the capacity to analyze the information that they encounter in their everyday lives and evaluate its truth claims.
- Civic knowledge: Students will demonstrate their recognition that they exist in a larger information ecosystem, and that their participation in it entails ethical choices.
- Community: In the absence of an on-campus learning experience, many of us are feeling isolated. My goal is for us to create a meaningful community that can both sustain our learning throughout the semester.

Course materials

All readings for this class are available online for free. We will be watching two films for this course: *Network* (1976) which will be made available to you online, and *Behind the Curve* (2018) which is available on Netflix. You are responsible for getting access to *Behind the Curve*. It is also available to stream for about \$4 through YouTube. If you are having trouble with that, please get in touch with me.

Course format

This course will contain both synchronous (meaning that we will be talking together on Zoom at the same time) and asynchronous (meaning that you can do them on your own time) elements.

We will make use of several digital tools:

- **WordPress:** Our course's WordPress site will host our syllabus and contain links to various resources. It can be found at <https://sophia.smith.edu/hst273-fa20/>
- **Exit tickets:** For each class period, you may complete a short "exit ticket" that asks you to reflect briefly on that class's material.
 - Note: completing exit tickets will boost your participation grade.
- **Perusall:** We will be collaboratively annotating our course's readings using the platform Perusall. More information about using Perusall for our course is available [here](#).
 - Note: Participating in Perusall annotation will boost your participation grade.
- **Slack:** We will use Slack as an informal space to communicate about course expectations, as a place for you to discuss the course's material asynchronously, and to create a community for our course. For information about joining our class Slack, [click here](#).
 - Note: Participating in Slack discussions will boost your participation grade.
- **Zoom:** During class times, we will meet for Zoom discussions to discuss the readings, your questions, and other topics relating to that day's topic. These may last for the 75-minute class period, or shorter. Because this is a discussion-oriented class, rather than a lecture course, *I strongly encourage you to attend as many Zoom discussions as possible*.
 - Note: Participating in Zoom discussions will boost your participation grade. I will not be taking attendance for each Zoom discussion but will keep a general sense of who is participating and them and who is not. Your participation grade will be weighted heavily toward Zoom discussions.
- **Videos:** This is not a lecture course, but I will occasionally create brief videos to provide additional context for readings. These will be uploaded to our syllabus on WordPress.

Grading

- Participation and engagement portfolios (20%, 10% each)
- Fake news analysis (10%)
- History fact check (25%)
- Public "Unessay" (35%)
- "Choose your own adventure" assignments (10%, 3.3% each)

Grading scale: A: 92–100; A-: 90–91; B+: 88–89; B: 82–87; B-: 80–81; C+: 78–79; C: 72–77; C-: 70–71; D: 60–69; F: 59 and below.

Virtual “office” hours

If you’re not familiar with the concept of “office hours,” they are a set period of time when your professors will be waiting for students to come talk with them. You might discuss the course, your work, get to know your instructor, raise concerns, or ask questions. Anything, really. Your professors are eager to talk to students in office hours. Attending office hours is a good way to ensure that your instructors know you. If you can’t make office hours, just send an email letting your instructor know this, and offer some other possible times to meet.

Note: I hope to see *everyone* in office hours by the time that you submit your first participation portfolio.

We will meet for office hours on Zoom. The link to the Zoom room where we will meet is: <https://smith.zoom.us/my/jordantaylor>

During the first few weeks of class, an expanded time frame for office hours will be available. Most weeks, however, I will plan for office hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 4:00–5:00pm (Eastern Time). You can schedule a meeting during these times using this tool: <https://appoint.ly/s/jtaylor/officehours> If you cannot meet during those times, please just send me an email with a few times that would work for you, and we’ll figure out a time to meet.

Attendance and participation

You will turn in two “participation portfolios,” one halfway through the semester and the second at the semester’s conclusion. These will be Google forms. In this portfolio, you should lay out the extent of your engagement with the course and its materials over the relevant period. You should also provide some evidence to support that. For example, you should share your extent of participation in synchronous discussions, Slack, Perusall annotations, emails, and office hours. You are welcome to include annotations or comments that you made.

Finally, your portfolio must include a self-assessment. What letter grade do you deserve for participation? Why? You may also share any circumstances that constrained your participation in our class (though you are not required to disclose anything specific or personal).

I will grade your participation based on your portfolio as well as my own judgment. If our assessments differ markedly, I will explain my thinking. I will judge participation based on the following rubric:

| Grade | Discussion | Engagement with instructor | Communication with Peers |
|--------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| A range | Extensive engagement with 2–3 discussion resources (Slack, Perusall, | Asks questions; attends office hours; professional communication | Extensive engagement with peers |

| | | | |
|-----------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Zoom meetings, exit tickets). | | |
| B range | Significant to moderate engagement with 1–2 discussion resources | Moderate engagement with instructor | Moderate engagement with peers |
| C range | Limited engagement with 1–2 discussion resources | Limited engagement with instructor | Limited engagement with peers |
| D–F range | No or limited engagement with discussion resources | No engagement with instructor | No engagement with peers |

Public “Unessay”

This class is designed to help us to understand the media dysfunction of the present through a sustained analysis of the past. But why keep this to ourselves?

For your final project, you will create a public project that communicates something important about our course to an audience outside of the class. It must be based on a close engagement with course materials. The exact medium and argument that you will be making are up to you. But the final project must demonstrate:

- Creativity. Create something that excites you. Feel free to choose a medium that you have experience with. You’re also welcome to choose a medium that you would like to explore more. The only guideline is that your project should not take the form of a traditional student essay.
 - I am happy to provide support and resources as you develop your ideas. Your proposal will provide a chance for us to discuss your idea.
- Effort. Your project should demonstrate a significant amount of effort. For example, a single meme might meet the guidelines of the assignment but would score very low in terms of effort.
- Engagement with course themes and materials. You must write an accompanying 500-word reflection that explains how your Public Unessay project reflects or builds upon the course’s themes and materials.

You might, for example, create any of the following: a zine, a podcast episode, a play, a board game or card game, a video, an op-ed, an Instagram account, a comic, a musical piece, etc. Your eventual project should be available to the public (a public that you define) by the end of class. However, it is up to you whether or not it carries your name.

You must [submit a proposal](#) for this project, which I will provide feedback on. It should identify: 1- the audience that you hope to reach. 2- the message or argument that you hope to communicate to them. 3- the medium through which this message will travel.

Fake News Analysis

As historians of fake news, we're analyzing materials that must have seemed rather mundane to people in the past. For this assignment, you will analyze something fairly mundane from your own life.

Task: Find a piece of fake news and analyze it as if you were a historian 50–100 years in the future.

What counts as a piece of fake news? For our purpose, your piece of fake news must meet several criteria. First, it must relate to issues of public interest. For example, include any encounters with climate change denial, lying politicians, misleading advertisements, or an inaccurate history meme on twitter. Please do not include, for example, a housemate explaining that she didn't eat the food you left in the fridge, even though it was *clearly* labeled. Second, it must be falsifiable: in other words, it can be shown to be false with evidence. Pieces of opinion should not be included. Finally, it should present itself as truthful. In other words, do not use a piece of satire, such as an article from *The Onion*.

Historical Analysis: In a 1,200–1,500-word essay, you should introduce and analyze a piece of fake news that you have chosen for this assignment. An effective paper will...

- Describe the context of your piece of fake news: what does it say? Who wrote it? What can you tell about its author? Where did it appear? When was it written? Why might that matter?
- Analyze the source. What does it imply? What appears to be its intended audience? How might the intended audience have affected the message? Through what medium is it transmitted? Through what methods does its author attempt to persuade the audience? Is the message entirely explicit, or are there implicit messages as well? Does it represent a particular ideology? What language does it use? What does the author *not* choose to talk about?
 - How do you know this is false? (would a historian in the future be able to tell that it's false?)
- Think historically. What does this source tell us about the moment of its creation? If you were a historian trying to understand the Fall of 2020, what would this source tell you? What limits does it have (in other words, what *can't* it tell you)? What questions about the Fall of 2020 does this help to answer?

Post: You should post your analysis on WordPress as a blog post. In order to do that, log in to our WordPress site, hover over "+ New" in the top bar, and click "Post."

History Fact Check

You will locate a piece of fake news from our present that relates to the past, especially the American past. It should be recent (i.e., written in the past six months).

Using what you have learned about fact-checking and the science of corrections, you will research and write a fact check about your chosen piece of history-centered fake news.

You must first submit a proposal of your piece of fake news.

Your fact check should take into account our readings and discussion. It will be graded based on the following criteria:

- **Thoroughness:** Your fact check should cover all aspects of the fake news item. It should demonstrate a thorough grasp of the relevant historical material.
- **Writing:** Your fact check should be clear, well-written, and obey the basic rules of effective fact-checking and the science of corrections.
- **Originality:** Ideally, your piece of fake news should not have been previously fact-checked by a prominent fact checker. If it has been previously fact-checked, you need to demonstrate original research that differs from previous efforts.
- **Effort:** Your project should demonstrate a significant amount of effort, especially in terms of your research. This fact check is worth a quarter of your final grade, and I expect you to perform substantial research (with my guidance).

Reflection: You should turn in here an approximately 300–400-word reflection that considers the process behind your fact check. It should demonstrate the relationship between your fact check and course themes/ideas/materials.

Posting: You will post your fact check as a blog post in this WordPress site.

“Choose your own adventure” Assignments

You will complete three “choose-your-own-adventure” assignments via Google forms. While these are low-stakes assignments, they are assessing your engagement with the readings due that day. The adventures are designed to give you opportunities to demonstrate your thoughtful engagement with the material.

You will receive full credit for these assignments if: 1- you complete them; 2- you demonstrate thoughtful engagement with relevant readings and class materials and apply this information to the scenarios presented; 3- you have fun with them.

Course Policies

I believe you: This is a difficult time for us all. When you share something with me, my default position will always be to trust you. I understand that this pandemic and remote learning are affecting all of us in different ways, and that not everyone will be able to work at the capacity that they would otherwise expect. Anything you share with me will, of course, be confidential.

Put your health first: If you find yourself sacrificing your mental or physical health for this class, please get in touch with me so that we can work together to avoid that.

Identity: This class respects students' rights to determine their own name(s), pronouns, and identities. If you feel that these rights are not being respected, *please* speak with me.

Religious holidays: This course respects students' observance of religious holidays. Email me.

Email and Slack communication: I expect all students to regularly check email and Slack. For simple queries, please consult the syllabus before asking me. I expect you to communicate courteously and professionally over email and Slack.

Plagiarism: Using someone else's words or ideas as your own, without clearly quoting and citing them, is plagiarism. It is a violation of the Honor Code. I will follow the college's procedures about plagiarism, which means bringing the matter to your Class Dean and the Honor Board. Please do not plagiarize.

Racist language: Some of our readings use racist language. Others use language that was appropriate at the time that it was written, but which is now outdated. It's important to study the history of race in America, which means occasionally reading racist language. However, we do not need to speak racial epithets aloud in class.

Reading for this class: Please expect to read 30–50 pages for each class. Readings for this course are primarily argument-driven essays and books. As you read, think about the following: what is the author's argument? Why is she making that claim? What evidence is she using to support it? How do you evaluate the argument?

Simply passing your eyes over every word on the page, without thinking about it, is "lazy reading." Instead, we will practice active reading. That means reading with a purpose: annotate, pause to take notes, look up words, or ask questions, skim through repetitive sections, spend more time on meaningful sections. Reading is a conversation between you and the author. Ask them questions, challenge them, and don't take everything they say for granted.

You are not expected to read every word on every page of every reading. Your goal is to understand the reading's argument as well as the nuance and complexity that surrounds that argument. You should take some time, even if it's just two minutes, after each reading to think about what you've just worked through, and why it might be important.

Some readings are marked “Skim.” For those, you should read through the introduction to get their general idea, pass quickly through the body of the text, and examine its conclusion. Readings marked “Skim” can generally be completed in 10 minutes or less.

Community standards: In our second class meeting, we will discuss our course’s expectations and policies. Together, we will craft a list of “community standards” that will consist of our values and expectations for this class, which I will circulate once it’s finished. Because I will be enforcing these policies, I reserve the right to “veto” any policies that I feel are unworkable. Below are the topics and questions that we can use as starting points to frame these conversations.

- Discussion: how can we create space for meaningful discussions?
- Respect: how can we ensure that everyone in the classroom feels respected and valued?
- Zoom expectations: how do we liberate ourselves from digital distraction during class?
- Content warnings: how can we prevent trauma from harming students and interfering with student learning?
- Late work and extensions: how can we allow for students to make mistakes and respond to stressful conditions while remaining fair to everyone?
- Other topics? What other issues would you like to raise or discuss?

Resources

Sexual misconduct: I am a responsible reporter regarding incidents of sexual violence and misconduct. That means that I am required to report incidents of sexual violence to our campus’s Title IX Coordinator. In that event, the Title IX Office will work with a small number of others on campus to ensure that appropriate measures are taken, and resources are made available to the student. Protecting a student’s privacy is of utmost concern, and all involved will only share information with those that need to know to ensure the University can respond and assist. See <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/title-ix>

Accessibility: It is important to me that everyone is able to succeed in this course. I will work with all students to accommodate any disabilities. We are lucky to have an excellent Office of Disability Services (ODS) at Smith. Note that they will work with you even if you don’t have a formal doctor’s note. Please submit requests for accommodations to ODS as soon as possible. They will generate a confidential letter that indicates the specific kinds of support that you need in the classroom. Please know that you don’t need to disclose your specific disability to me, and ODS will not unless you ask them to. <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/disability-services>

I try to make this course as accessible as possible. My understanding of what accessibility means is always evolving. Please help me by letting me know if I can do anything, even if it seems small, to make the class more accessible at any point in the semester. You can do this through email, in person, or through [this anonymous Google](#)

[form](#). When you submit to the Google form, I will get an email with your request but with no personal information.

Writing center: The Jacobson Center for Writing is an incredible resource that offers appointments and walk-in peer tutors to help you to develop your writing abilities. They are prepared to help students with public writing.
<https://www.smith.edu/jacobsoncenter/>

Course Schedule

Note: this schedule may change. If I make changes, I will notify you.

Week 1

Sept. 2: Course introduction

Week 2: Media History

Sept. 7: Thinking with Media / Community Standards

Read: Postman, "The Medium is the Metaphor," and "Media as Epistemology," *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985).

Sept. 9: Gossip

Read: Norton, "Gossip and the Essex County Witchcraft Crisis of 1692," (2014).

Explore: [Salem Witchcraft Papers digital edition](#).

Complete: "[Survive the Witch Hunt](#)" adventure.

Read: "Rumors, Lies, and Half-Truths," *Indianapolis Star*, May 11, 1997.

Due: Choose your own adventure #1.

Week 2: The Early American Newspaper

Sept. 14: The Free Press?

Explore: *America's Historical Newspapers* database. Find a colonial American newspaper (i.e., 1704–1760) and scan through it. What topics is it discussing? What is being advertised?

Read: Franklin, "Apology for Printers."

Read: McCarthy, "[Zuckerberg says Facebook won't be 'arbiters of truth' after Trump threat](#)," *The Guardian* (2020).

Sept. 16: Revolutionary America and the Press

Read: Robert Parkinson, *The Common Cause*, excerpt.

Read: Dowd, *Groundless*, ch. 9.

Read: "A Caution to Virginia," *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1775.

Week 3: Nineteenth Century Press

Sept. 21: Penny Press

Read: Clapp, "'A Virago-Errant in Enchanted Armor?'" (2003). (27 pages)

Read: Young, "[Moon Shot](#)," (2017).

Explore: "[The Great Moon Hoax of 1835](#)," *Museum of Hoaxes*.

Sept. 23: Race and Epistemic Injustice

Read: Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," Feb. 13, 1893.

Content note: this speech describes acts of racial terror and violence in the 19th century U.S. It also contains racist language.

Read: Responses to Ida B. Wells

Read: Sussman, [“The ‘Miscegenation’ Troll,”](#) (2019).
Explore: [Miscegenation pamphlet](#)
Content warning: nineteenth-century racism.

Week 4: Journalism at a Crossroads

Sept. 28: Yellow Journalism

Read: Tucher, “The True, the False, and the ‘Not Exactly Lying,’” (2013).
Read: “Unreliable War News,” *The Fourth Estate*, May 19, 1898.
Due: Fake news analysis.

Sept. 30: Professionalism and Objectivity

Read: Tuchman, “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual,” (1972).
Read: Rosenberg, [“The Battle Between W.E.B. Du Bois and His White Editor Was an Early Reckoning Over Objectivity,”](#) (2020).
Due: Choose your own adventure #2.

Week 5: The Decline of Objectivity?

Oct. 5: Propaganda and Public Relations

Read: Greenberg, “The Ominous Clang,” from *Media Nation* (2017).
Read: Arendt, “Truth and Politics” (1967).

Oct. 7: Clickbait and the Fall of the “Wall of Separation”

Watch: *Network* (1976). (Moodle)
Read: Postman, “The Peek-a-Boo World,” “The Age of Show Business,” and “Now... This,” from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985).

Week 6: Mass Media

Oct. 12: Fall Break

Oct. 14: The Corporate Mass Media and Identity

Read: Kerner Commission report, excerpt (1968).
Read: Glass, [“Taxis and the Meaning of Work,”](#) *New Republic* (1996).
Skim: Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, introduction, ch. 1–4.
Read: Herman and Chomsky, “The Propaganda Model,” *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).

Week 7: Fragmentation

Oct. 19: Rebirth of Partisan Media

Read: Hemmer, “From ‘Faith in Facts’ to ‘Fair and Balanced,’” (2017).
Read: Agnew, “Television News Coverage,” (1969).
Read: Zelizer, “How Washington Helped Create the Contemporary Media,” (2017).
Due: participation portfolio #1.

Oct. 21: Social Media

Read: Caulfield, [“Cynicism, Not Gullibility, Will Kill Our Humanity,”](#) (2018).
Read: Caulfield, [“Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers.”](#)

Week 8: Are We Post-Truth?

Oct. 26: Postmodernism, Anti-Intellectualism, and the Dethroning of Experts
Read: Hanlon, [“Postmodernism didn’t cause Trump. It explains him,”](#) (2018).
Skim/Do Your Best With: Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” (1988).
Read: Hughes, “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000,” (2017).
Read: Saslow, [“Nothing on this Page is Real”](#) (2018).

Oct. 28: The Fact Check
Read: Graves, “Anatomy of a Fact Check.”
Read: FactCheck.org, [“Our Process.”](#)
Read: Cook and Lewandowsky, “Debunking Handbook.”
Due: Choose your own adventure #3.

Week 9:

Nov. 2: Fake Politics
Read: Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth*, ch. 1.
Explore: Hinman, “How a British Subject Became President of the United States,” (1884).
Read: Subramanian, [“Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex,”](#) (2017).

Nov. 4: Fake History
Read: Lipstadt, “Canaries in the Mine,” (1994).
Read: Snopes, [“Were There Irish Slaves, Too?”](#) (2016).
Read: Mariano, [“Sons of Confederate Veterans spokesman said many blacks fought for the South,”](#) *PolitiFact* (2011).

Week 10:

Nov. 9: Fake Science
Watch: *Behind the Curve* (2019) (Netflix and other viewing options).
Read: Rothstein, “Vaccines and Their Critics, Then and Now,” *New Atlantis* (2015).

Nov. 11: Fake Medicine
Read: Young, “AIDS and Deceptive Therapies” (1992).
Explore: Dushman, [“Ads and Labels From Early 20th-Century Health Fraud Promotions,”](#) (2018).
Skim: Pernick, “Politics, Parties, and Pestilence” (1972).
Due: History Fact Check proposal.

Week 11:

Nov. 16: Early American Conspiracy Theories

Read: Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," (1982).
Skim: Morse, "A Sermon Delivered at the New North Church," (1798), 11–29.

Nov. 18: Modern American Conspiracy Theories

Read: Olmsted, "Trust No One: Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories from the 1970s to the 1990s," (2009).

Read: Dickey, "[Climb Aboard, Ye Who Seek the Truth!](#)" (2016).

Explore: [QAnon Facebook group](#).

Content note: it is impossible to predict which conspiracy theories QAnon groups will circulate at any given moment. If you'd rather not look into this, please do not click.

Due: Public "Unessay" Proposal

Week 12:

Nov. 23: The Paranormal

Read: Scribner, "Diving into Mysterious Waters," (2018).

Read: Black, "The Spirit-Photograph Fraud," (1922).

Due: History Fact Check and reflection.

Week 13: Conclusions

Nov. 30:

Read: Dolnick, "[The Man Who Knew Too Little](#)," *New York Times* (2018).

Read: Wulf, "[Could footnotes be the key to winning the disinformation wars?](#)" (2019).

Read: Rini, "[How to Fix Fake News](#)," *New York Times* (2018).

Dec. 2: Conclusions

Dec. 7: No class held.

Due: Public "Unessay"

Due: participation portfolio #2.