

MIT 3872 - Fake News

Western University

Winter 2021

Course Instructor:

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Office Hours: by appointment. To arrange a meeting, please send an email and we can schedule a time to meet.

Course Description:

This course examines fake news from the history of communication and our own historical moment. Are we really living in a post-truth world filled with alternative facts? Who gets to decide what's fake news and what's real? What is the line between truth and fact, and how does the introduction of new media continually re-shape that line? This course takes two approaches to fake news: first, we will analyze pertinent historical theories and cases that set-up our modern media eco-system. How have we thought about the "truth" of representation in the past and how did technologies like the printing press and photography alter these notions? Second, we will examine cases from recent history, from fabrications, satire, and conspiracies to identity politics, propaganda, and rogue reporting. What is it about the production and consumption of information in our own time that lends itself to the term "fake" as a description of such a wide variety of modern experiences? In this course, we will not only talk about fake news, but explore different ways of thinking with and about it.



Learning Outcomes:

- Define Fake News from a variety of perspectives
- Identify how the introduction of new media changes our understanding of true and false
- Describe and discuss the cultural significance of contemporary Fake News
- Evaluate news sources and projects that aim to educate about Fake News

Course Resources:

All course readings and materials are available through the course OWL page.

Assessments:

1. Participation = 15% (online and/or online)
2. Issue Framing Paper = 20% (Due: Feb. 8th)
3. Take-home Midterm exam = 25% (Posted to OWL Feb. 22; due March 1st)
4. Essay Proposal and Annotated Bibliography = 10% (Due: March 10th)
5. Final Paper = 30% (Due: April 7th)

Course Format:

This course will consist of:

- **Weekly class modules:** each Wednesday morning, I will post a new class module to OWL for you to complete. Each module will be comprised of short, recorded video lectures, along with other resources such as videos/clips, news articles, and possibly some notes.
- **Zoom seminars:** starting in Week 2, I will be holding Zoom seminars held for 1-hour sometime Monday between 9:30-12:30 (time to be decided based on class vote). During these meetings, we will review basic concepts and discuss course materials. For these tutorials, please bring in examples and ideas to help spark discussion. If students do not have an opportunity to engage in Zoom seminars, they can also engage in discussions in the online forums.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & DESCRIPTIONS:

1. **Participation = 15% (ongoing):** Participation and discussion are an essential element of the learning process, and students will be provided with many opportunities to contribute their thoughts and opinions in discussion forums or Zoom seminars. Starting in Class 2, we will begin meeting on Zoom for 1-hour weekly discussions (held sometime Monday between 9:30am-12:30). In lieu of this, students can also post comments and materials in the OWL discussion forums. Students will be graded on the strength and quantity of their contributions. To keep discussions regular and timely, discussion forums will close one week after the lecture and questions are originally posted.
2. **Issue Framing Paper = 20% (Due by Feb. 8th):** For this assignment, students will be asked to write a 1000-1200 paper that explores one recent controversial issue or fake news story and examine it in relation to course concepts and materials. In this paper, students will explore issues such as bias, framing, and discuss how the news can amplify or mislead readers. Your responses will be graded on the depth of your understanding and the clarity of your ideas. More information will be provided on a handout.
3. **Midterm Exam = 25% (posted to OWL on February 22nd, due by March 1st at 11:55pm):** During Week 6, students will write a take-home midterm based on the course readings and lecture materials. Students are responsible for knowing key thinkers, key concepts, and the themes explored in class. The exam will likely be comprised of short answer questions and one essay question.
4. **Paper proposal and Annotated Bibliography - 10% (Due March 10th):** Students are required to submit a paper proposal and annotated bibliography that outlines your final paper topic. You do not need to have a precise thesis at this time, but your proposal should clearly outline a topic or issue central to fake news and discuss its relevance, highlight some potential questions you will address, and provide annotations for at least 5 academic sources you will use to support your paper. A

more detailed description of the expectations for this assignment will be provided in class prior to the due date.

5. **Final Paper = 30% (Due: April 7th):** Students are required to write a final 2000-word (approx. 7-8 pages) research paper that builds on the issues addressed in the course. Students must use at least 5 academic sources (at least 3 from outside of the course) to support their arguments. More information on the written assignment will be provided in class prior to the due date and will be posted on OWL.

COURSE POLICIES:

Email: Before you email me, please check the course syllabus for the answer to your questions. In general, I will attempt to check my email at least once a day, however, please note that responses often take 24-36 hours for a response.

Late Policy: All assignments are due on OWL on the assigned date. Late assignments will be deducted 5% per day, unless the student has documented medical or family emergency.

Readings: Make sure that you have completed the readings before class. Assignment and online discussion grades will depend on the strength and quality of your responses, so closely read the assigned articles and be prepared to discuss them in class.

Grading: Students will receive graded work worth no less than 15% at least 3 days prior to the deadline for withdrawal without academic penalty. This year, the date by which students are to have received at least 15% of their grade in a Winter semester course is Friday, March 12, 2021. Students can find details about this academic policy here: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/evaluation_undergrad.pdf. Please note, students are responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the grades they have received in their courses.

Land Acknowledgement: Western University is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lunaapeewak and Attawandaron peoples who have longstanding relationships to the land and region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nation communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

CLASS SCHEDULE: (classes posted to OWL Wednesdays at 9am)

WEEK 1 - Jan. 13 - THE POST-TRUTH ERA

Reading: Lee McIntyre, "What is Post-Truth?" & "Science Denial" from *Post-Truth*

Suggested: Please watch Desmond Cole's Clissold Lecture on Thursday, January 14th at 7:00pm.

Info available at: <http://www.events.westernu.ca/events/fims/2021-01/desmond-cole.html>

(***YouTube link will be made available after day of talk***)

WEEK 2 - Jan. 20 - NEWS, TRUTH, & OBJECTIVITY?

Readings: Stuart Hall et al. "The Social Production of News" from *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and Law and Order*

& Ellen Moore, "Canadian Newspaper Coverage of Dakota Access Pipeline" from *Journalism, Politics, & the Dakota Access Pipeline*

WEEK 3 - Jan. 27 - BRANDING THE NEWS SPECTACLE

Readings: Jeffrey Jones, "The 'New' News as No 'News': Us Cable News Channels as Branded Political Entertainment Television"

& Jeffrey Jones, "Fox News and the Performance of Ideology"

WEEK 4 - Feb. 3 - SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL DISTORTIONS

Readings: Marcus Gilroy-Ware, "Digital Distortions" from *After the Fact? The Truth About Fake News*

& Siva Vaidhyanathan, "The Attention Machine" from *AntiSocial Media*

WEEK 5 - Feb. 10 - THE DISINFORMATION AGE

Readings: Siva Vaidhyanathan, "The Disinformation Machine"

Please Skim: Anthony Nadler, Matthew Crain, & Joan Donovan, "Weaponizing the Digital Influence Machine: The Political Perils of Online Ad Tech."

<https://datasociety.net/library/weaponizing-the-digital-influence-machine/>

Due: *Issue Framing Paper (1000-1200 words)*

*****Feb. 15th-21st Reading Week*****

WEEK 6 - Feb. 22 - MIDTERM EXAM (TAKE HOME)

Exam Questions: posted to OWL on Feb. 22nd

Responses: due by Wednesday, March 1st at 11:55pm

WEEK 7 - March 3 - CONSPIRACY PANICS

Guest lecture by David Guignon

Readings: Timothy Melley, "Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy" from *Conspiracy Nation: the Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*

Additional TBA

WEEK 8 - March 10 - CULTURE WARS & TROLLS

Readings: Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies* (selections)

& Whitney Phillips, "The Oxygen of Amplification" from <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>

Due: *Essay Proposal*

WEEK 9 - March 17 - INFLUENCERS & LIFESTYLE GURUS

Readings: Stephanie Baker & Chris Rojek, "Lifestyle Gurus as Trusted Companions" & "Lifestyle Gurus as Unregulated Advisors" from *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing Authority and Influence Online*

Watch: episode of *The Goop Lab*

WEEK 10 - March 24 - SATIRE & JAMMING THE NEWS

Readings: Amber Davisson & Mackenzie Donovan, "Breaking the News...On a Weekly Basis': Trolling as Rhetorical Style on *Last Week Tonight*."

& Nickie Michaud Wild, "'The Mittens of Disapproval are On': John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* as Neoliberal Critique"

Watch: episode of *Last Week Tonight...with John Oliver*

WEEK 11 - March 31 - FREE SPEECH AND MODERATING "FAKE" NEWS

Readings: Alice Marwick, "Are There Limits to Free Speech?"
<https://points.datasociety.net/are-there-limits-to-online-free-speech-14dbb7069aec>

Please Skim: Robyn Caplan, Lauren Hanson, & Joan Donovan, "Dead Reckoning: Navigating Content Moderation after 'Fake News.'" https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/DataAndSociety_Dead_Reckoning_2018.pdf

WEEK 12 - April 7th - CONCLUSION: COMBATTING FAKE NEWS

No readings

Due: Final Paper (due via OWL by 11:55pm)

NOTES FROM THE FIMS DEAN'S OFFICE

Winter 2021

Rights and Responsibilities

The conditions governing a student's ability to pursue their undergraduate education at Western are ratified by Senate and can be found on the Academic Policies section of the University Secretariat:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/rights_responsibilities.html

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments, including take-home exams, in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence. All papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software Turnitin under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#)

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

Students will have two (2) opportunities during the regular academic year to use an on-line portal to self-report an absence during the term, provided the following conditions are met: the absence is no more than 48 hours in duration, and the assessment

for which consideration is being sought is worth 30% or less of the student's final grade. Students are expected to contact their instructors within 24 hours of the end of the period of the self-reported absence, unless noted on the syllabus. Students are not able to use the self-reporting option in the following circumstances:

- during exam periods,
- absence of a duration greater than 48 hours,
- assessments worth more than 30% of the student's final grade,
- if a student has already used the self-reporting portal twice during the academic year

If the conditions for a Self-Reported Absence are NOT met, students will need to provide a Student Medical Certificate or equivalent documentation, if the absence is medical, or provide appropriate documentation if there are compassionate grounds for the absence in question. Students are encouraged to contact the FIMS Undergraduate Student Services Office to obtain more information about the relevant documentation.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for consideration on medical grounds, or for other reasons. **All documentation required for absences that are not covered by the Self-Reported Absence Policy must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's home Faculty.**

For Western University policy on Consideration for Student Absence, see [Policy on Academic Consideration For Student Absences - Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#) and for the Student Medical Certificate (SMC), see: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf

In the event of a Covid-19 resurgence, it is possible that different procedures may need to be put in place on short notice.

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the [Western Academic Calendar](#).

Grading at FIMS

- Normally, first year courses required for entry into an MIT or MPI module (MIT 1020E and MIT 1025F/G) are expected to have a course average between 68-72%.
- Normally, second year required courses (MIT 2000, 2100, 2200, 2500) are expected to have a course average between 70 and 75%.
- Normally, third year required courses (MIT 3000, 3100) are expected to have a course average between 72 and 77%.

Elective courses and 4th year seminars have no recommended course averages.

Support Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

SUPPORT SERVICES - LINKS

Office of the Registrar:

www.registrar.uwo.ca

Mental Health

Support:

<https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html>

Accessible Education:

http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html

Accessibility

Information:

www.accessibility.uwo.ca/

Writing Support

Centre:

<http://writing.uwo.ca/>

Learning Skills

Services:

<https://www.uwo.ca/sdc/learning/>

Academic Learning and Support for Online Learning:

<https://www.uwo.ca/se/digital/types/academic-and-learning-support.html>

Indigenous Services:

<https://indigenous.uwo.ca/>

Western International:

<https://international.uwo.ca/>

Career Centre:

<http://careerexperience.uwo.ca/>

Appendix A: Suggested Grade Ranges in MIT, MPI and MTP

Guidelines to the MIT Grade Range

These guidelines are benchmarks, and are not to be followed as rigid regulations. They will be adjusted as appropriate to take into account the level of the course and any specific instructions given by a professor. As well, competency in English language usage (including spelling and grammar) may be taken into account in the assignment of grades by individual instructors. Note that the 70-79 grade range is broken into two divisions, as this is the grade range into which a large number of students fall.

90-100 (Outstanding, A+)

The report shows sparkling originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic. Sophisticated synthesis and analysis of the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of the topic are demonstrated. Mastery of complex material and ideas is immediately evident. The topic is treated with sensitivity and subtlety of thought. The quality of the writing and background research is exemplary.

80-89 (Excellent, A)

The report shows originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic; it gets to the heart of the matter with comments and/or questions. It is clearly focused and logically organized. The quality of writing makes the report immediately understandable. Mastery of complex material and ideas is demonstrated. The report is of appropriate length, while preserving the priorities and emphasis of the material, so that the result is meaningful, not simplistic.

75-79 (Very Good, B+)

The report shows above average analysis, critical thinking and independent thought. Claims are supported by ample evidence and the components of the topic are well-researched and presented. The topic is addressed in reasonable depth and/or breadth and covers material appropriate to the course. The analysis is organized around focal points and the argument is easily followed. The report demonstrates an above average ability to write in an intelligible style and to condense material meaningfully and with a concern for priorities of that material.

70-74 (Good, B)

The report shows an attempt at analysis and critical thinking. Claims are supported by reasonable evidence. The topic is addressed in some depth and/or breadth, with references to the appropriate literature and course material. The analysis is organized around focal points. The report is generally well written and well argued.

60-69 (Competent, C)

The report demonstrates adequate comprehension of the topic. The report is on topic and is a reasonable summary of material covered in the course, but goes no further. Facts are stated accurately; the quality of writing is sufficiently intelligible with enough elaboration and enough connections made between ideas to permit a reader to understand the point of the report.

50-59 (Marginal, D)

The report shows less than adequate comprehension of the topic and of the material covered by the course. The report is a less than adequate summary of sources and/or is considerably off-topic. Facts are stated inaccurately or ambiguously; the writing style is difficult to follow; there is insufficient elaboration to permit reader's comprehension of relations among ideas; little judgment is shown in selecting detail for inclusion in the report.

Below 50 (Unacceptable, F)

The report demonstrates a failure to comprehend the topic. The material is disorganized and unintelligible. The report clearly does not meet the minimal requirements of the assignment.

Appendix B: Guidelines of Academic Appeals for FIMS Students

Grounds for Appeal:

The Faculty of Information and Media Studies does not view the appeals process as an opportunity for students to solicit a second opinion on a grade assigned to a particular piece of work. Appeals must pertain to the final grade in a course, and will only be entertained if sufficient grounds for appeal can be met, including: medical or compassionate circumstances, a defect in the evaluation process, bias, inaccuracy or unfairness.

Stages in the Appeals Process:

The first stage of the process is a discussion of the disputed grade with the appropriate Teaching Assistant (if applicable), and subsequently, the course Instructor. For grades assigned to individual assignments, essays, lab reports, projects and tests completed throughout the term, the student first must appeal to the Teaching Assistant or Instructor of the course, within three weeks of the date on which the Instructor or Teaching Assistant returned the assignments to the class. The Appeals Committee will not hear any further appeals about the final grade in any course unless this first step has been taken.

If completion of the first stage has not resolved the matter, the student may appeal the final grade in the course to the FIMS Appeals Committee. Appeals of final grades must be **within the time frame indicated in the Undergraduate Calendar.** It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the appeal is submitted within the deadline. The student shall submit a formal letter to the FIMS Appeals Committee outlining the grounds for the appeal, the remedy sought and relevant materials including the information about when and with whom (Teaching Assistant and/or Instructor) the student met, as described in Stage 1. If the appeal involves a request for work to be regraded, the original marked work and a clean copy (if possible) must be included. If the appeal is commenced once the deadline has passed, it will not be considered either by the Appeals Committee or by the Associate Dean.

The FIMS Appeals Committee has the discretion to determine whether the grounds for appeal have been met.

If the Committee deems that the reasons for the appeal are not legitimate, the Associate Dean will be informed. The appeal will be terminated and the student will be informed.

If the Committee decides that the grounds for appeal have been met, the following steps will be taken:

1. the course Instructor will be shown the appeal letter and offered an opportunity to make a written response;
2. if work is to be regraded, a reader will be appointed who is competent in the area in question and was not involved in the assignment of the original mark. The reader will consider the work in question and will arrive at an independent evaluation. If there is a large discrepancy between the original mark and the regraded mark, a second reader may be appointed by the Committee. **If the appointed reader(s) arrive at a grade within five marks of the original, the original grade will stand.**

The FIMS Appeals Committee will review the evidence and will make a recommendation on the case to the Associate Dean Undergraduate.

The Associate Dean Undergraduate will consider the recommendation from the Appeals Committee, and will make a decision. The student and the instructor will be notified promptly and in writing by the Associate Dean of the decision and of the change in grade, if any. Within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, the Associate Dean's decision on the matter is final.

Further appeals are possible under certain circumstances to the Senate Review Board Academic (for Undergraduate students) or to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (for Graduate students) but the student should carefully consult the guidelines regarding such Appeals.