GOVT 30:
Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan
Office: Silsby 305
Email: nyhan@dartmouth.edu
Phone: 603/646-2894

Classroom: 206 Dartmouth Hall
Schedule: TTH 2–3:50 PM
x-period: Wed. 4:15–5:05 PM
Office hours: Wed. 9–11 AM

“It takes two to speak the truth — one to speak, and another to hear.”
–Henry David Thoreau

Overview of the course
Why do people hold false or unsupported beliefs about politics and why are so those beliefs so hard to change? This course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to political misinformation and conspiracy theories and the reasons that corrections so often fail to change their minds. We will also analyze how those tendencies are exploited by political elites and consider possible approaches that journalists and civic reformers could employ to combat misperceptions.

Instructional approach
Each class period will include a mix of lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them, class discussion, and active learning exercises in which we critically examine the ideas introduced in the readings. I will typically lecture in the first part of the class and facilitate discussion and group work in the second part.

Learning objectives
By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Identify the psychological factors that promote belief in misperceptions;
- Explain why conspiracy theories often arise under conditions of stress, danger, or uncertainty;
- Assess the ways in which elites may promote false or unsupported claims;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to countering misperceptions and conspiracy theories;
• Assess concerns that widespread belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories undermines democracy.

I expect each student to complete and understand the assigned readings. However, we will aspire to not just learn this material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing connections between the readings, and critiquing authors’ assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you take these additional steps in your thinking over the course of the quarter.

Course requirements and expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each class and to contribute to class discussion. Each student will be expected to make an especially significant contribution during one course session in which they are assigned to serve as an expert discussant. You should submit 3-5 discussion questions on the readings for that class to me by email 48 hours before the class in question. You are also expected to follow relevant political news—we will begin each class by discussing misperceptions and conspiracy theories in the news and relating those events to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

Communication

The class will be run through Canvas. I will use it to email announcements to you and provide access to assigned readings. Please submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email unless otherwise instructed. However, if you have questions, feel free to come to my office hours or email me.

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding the academic integrity rules at Dartmouth. Explanations of integrity rules and principles can be found at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~uja/ Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade in the class. Details on citing sources are available at http://dartmouth.edu/writing-speech/learning/materials/sources-and-citations-dartmouth Please see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.
Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. In general, each student is expected to attend class on time with the readings completed and to contribute thoughtfully to class discussion when appropriate. Especially thoughtful contributions to class discussion will be taken into consideration when final grades are assigned. I also reserve the right to grade students down for using laptops for any purpose other than taking notes because it often distracts other students. Finally, late work will be graded down 10% for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes (10%)

During the quarter, several classes will begin with a one-question quiz intended to determine if you completed the readings (one point will be awarded simply for attending class). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped. (I reserve the right to count attendance as a quiz score if there is low turnout or to use whether an assignment was completed as a quiz score.)

Midterms (50%)

The class will include two closed-book in-class midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course (i.e., the second will only cover the portion of the course after the first midterm). These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays. A study guide for the midterms that includes more information on the exams is provided at the end of this syllabus. (Note: Both exams will be curved.)
Project: Understanding & countering misinformation (40%)

Each student will write a paper of 3000–4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories from the course to help explain the development and spread of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory and critique the efforts that were made to counter it. You should make a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations about the development, timing, spread, or features of the myth and the reasons that fact-checking was ineffective that you can evaluate using historical sources, journalistic accounts, or quantitative data. Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to description and summaries of other people’s work—the goal is to make an original argument about a myth or misperception, not to recapitulate other research or recount the history of the myth in exhaustive detail.

In the course of making your argument, your paper should answer these key questions:

1. How can we use the theories in question to understand the spread of the myth?

2. Is what we observe consistent with those theories? Why or why not?

3. What implications does this case have for the theories in question (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? What implications do your findings have for our understanding of the misperception itself?

4. What implications do the theories you have identified have for the effectiveness of the fact-checking tools or content in question? How could those tools or content be improved to better counter misperceptions? (Be specific! Use real examples as case studies and make sure to ground your critique in the readings from the course or other relevant readings from the academic literature.)

5. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of misperceptions more generally?

You should also beware of the risk of hindsight bias. It may seem obvious in retrospect that a misperception developed, but keep the contingency of history in mind. In particular, look for cases in which some aspects of the myth failed to develop and spread while others flourished. What explains the difference?

A draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 4:15 PM on April 21 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 5 PM on April 26. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version. A complete draft of your paper including references is due on Canvas May 12 by 4:15 PM for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to
The final version of your paper is due by 8 AM on June 2. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. Students who fail to submit complete draft proposals or papers will have their final grades on the assignment reduced by 10% (i.e., one letter grade).

Optional: For students who are interested, the paper can be modified to focus exclusively on critiquing previous fact-checks of a given myth or misperception and explaining how those motivate a new approach to fact-checking. These could include any of the following:

- Conceptual descriptions of new approaches to fact-checking that differ from those of the existing elite fact-checkers (PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, Washington Post Fact Checker)
- Proposals for new online tools to counter misinformation that improve upon or differ from existing efforts (e.g., Truth Goggles, Truth Teller, LazyTruth, etc.)
- Videos demonstrating new concepts for television ad watches (beyond those employed by, e.g., FlackCheck)

If you include a design component, your paper should answer these key questions:

1. What is your design? How would it work? What makes it different from the tools or content that were typically used to address your myth?
2. How is the design of your fact-checking tools or content motivated by theories from the course?
3. Why would this approach address the psychology of misinformation and conspiracy theories more effectively than existing fact-checking tools or content?

Articles with substantial video, graphics, or other innovative content may be somewhat shorter than the word limit. (Note: Any such content must be specifically grounded in the relevant literature. Flashy graphics and video for their own sake are not encouraged. Please consult with me if you have questions.)

Extra credit: Applications and case studies

Students may submit example articles about misperceptions and conspiracy theories that are particularly illustrative of or relevant to theoretical points from the academic readings to the professor. If I use your article in class or add it to the syllabus for next year, you will receive 0.5% extra credit toward your final grade (up to 1% per student).

1To make appointments, go to RWIT’s appointment scheduler at [http://dartmouth.edu/writing-speech/learning/support-writing-research-and-composing-technology/students/make-appointment](http://dartmouth.edu/writing-speech/learning/support-writing-research-and-composing-technology/students/make-appointment) or drop by the Center in 183 Baker-Berry Library, Level One (next to the Reference area) from 4–6 pm and 7–10 pm Sunday through Thursday.
Course materials

No books are required for this course. A few chapters from books or articles that are not publicly available will be available as PDFs on Canvas and are labeled as such below. All other assigned readings can be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the VPN to access those that are behind academic journal paywalls.)

Note: I will frequently assign blog posts and articles from the popular press to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled “Context and examples” in the schedule below to distinguish them from “Core readings.” Both are required but you should devote particular effort to the academic articles, which are typically more difficult to read and understand.

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that we will use several x-periods due to schedule conflicts or peer review sessions. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (3/25)

- Course syllabus

Experiments and statistics primer (3/26–x-period)

Experiments:


- Assignment (must be uploaded to Canvas by 12 PM before class): Submit 3–5 questions about the experimental designs in the sample article, the inferences the authors draw, and/or the statistical analyses they conducted.

Read it closely! We will work through the article in detail during class.

Statistics:

• Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

Survey evidence and case studies (3/27)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Understanding political misinformation

Knowledge and misinformation (4/1)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Motivated reasoning (4/8)

Core readings:


- “The Impact of Accuracy Incentives on Partisan Bias in Reports of Economic Perceptions.” Unpublished manuscript.

Context and examples:


Information environments and elite configurations (4/10)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Cognitive errors, faulty memories, and belief perseverance (4/15)

Core readings:


**Context and examples:**


**Social category differences (4/17)**

• Special guest: Josh Kertzer
  


Context and examples:


Science and health misperceptions (4/22)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Peer review session (4/23–x-period)

• Due 48 hours before class: Proposal draft

• Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for assignment
2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that seem especially strong and two that need further development.

3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise the paper.

- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Rumors (4/24)

Rumors:


Context and examples:


Midterm (4/29)

- Midterm course survey ([http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_40IL8pnaNPdfYW1](http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_40IL8pnaNPdfYW1)) must be submitted to take exam

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Historical context and contemporary case studies (5/1)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


• Cavan Sieczkowski (2013). “Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory Video Debunked By Experts.” Huffington Post, January 16, 2013. (Peruse the Sandy Hook conspiracy video embedded in the article.)


**The psychology of conspiracy theories (5/6)**

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Lack of control and the search for causes (5/7–x-period)


Context and examples:


Moving forward: New threats and approaches

Misinformation in old & new media; improving media practice (5/13)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Peer review session (5/14–x-period)

• Due 48 hours before class: Paper draft

• Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review (pairs)
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for assignment
  2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and two that could be improved further
  3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise their paper

• Class discussion of paper progress

• Review and discussion of peer review responses

Are ad watches effective? (5/15)

Core readings:


Context and examples:
Combating misinformation: New tools and ideas (5/20)

Core readings:

Context and examples:

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (5/22)
Midterm 2 (5/27)

Misinformation paper due (6/3)
GOVT 30 midterm study guide

Syllabus description

The class will include two closed-book in-class midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays.

Exam details

- Each covers approximately half the class
- Closed-book and held during class
- Reading list provided as an appendix
- Test conceptual knowledge and understanding of readings and lectures, not tiny details of individual studies or examples
- Items may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays (up to one page)

Questions to review for core readings

Scientific studies (experimental/statistical):

- What is the authors’ main hypothesis?
- What is the mechanism (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their general approach to testing their theory?
- What are their key results?
- How are those results similar to/different from others we have read?

Conceptual (non-empirical):

- What are the authors’ main hypothesis or argument?
- What are the key claims or concepts in their argument?
- What are the mechanisms they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument similar to/different from others we have read?

Sample question (brief essay)

Briefly explain the difference between “fact avoidance” and “meaning avoidance” according to Gaines et al. (2007) and summarize their findings.
## Understanding and countering misinformation rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis/argument</td>
<td>Clear, strong arguments that go beyond description, address important objections</td>
<td>Discernible arguments but not strong/clear enough or too much description</td>
<td>Unclear or weak arguments; mainly description or assertion; incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>Creative new arguments or approaches—combines or applies theories in new ways</td>
<td>Some analytical originality in approach; opportunities for greater creativity</td>
<td>Little originality; relies mainly on arguments and evidence from class/sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided in support of arguments</td>
<td>Details and facts support arguments, but more needed or some lacking relevance</td>
<td>Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and/or lack relevancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of course concepts</td>
<td>Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to research topic</td>
<td>Conveys familiarity with course concepts; applies concepts to topic appropriately</td>
<td>Basic course concepts not applied appropriately; incorrect or incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization that develops argument appropriately; does not stray off topic</td>
<td>Organization not totally clear; some digressions or lack of needed structure</td>
<td>Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from agreed-upon topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of expression</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
<td>Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing</td>
<td>Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>