

Political Science 380: Seeking Truth in an Age of Misinformation, Cynicism, and Political Polarization

University of Washington
Autumn 2022

Professor Mark Alan Smith

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office hours: Tuesdays 2:00-3:00, in person in Gowen 29

Wednesdays 4:00-5:00, by Zoom (see Canvas page for link)

Teaching Assistants:

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Overview of Class:

Many commentators have proclaimed that we are living in an era of “post-truth,” defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The forces leading to this phenomenon have been building in the U.S. and around the world over the last few decades. An academic movement often called “postmodernism” has asserted that there are no overarching truths, just local truths relative to each person or community. Meanwhile, the public has lost confidence in the people and institutions that used to serve as arbiters of truth, including experts, the media, governmental bodies, and organized religion. The information environment now includes both fake news and false allegations of fake news. The result is a profound challenge: How can anyone know what’s true? The answer for many people today is whatever feels true from within the filter bubble of their social media and personal networks.

This course will focus on the pursuit of truth in the contemporary world. Recognizing the need to examine competing perspectives on important topics, the syllabus includes authors writing from a range of political and ideological orientations (left, right, centrist, libertarian, etc.). We will learn the tools of critical and scientific thinking and then apply them to politics and other areas of controversy. We will gain insights into the political and cognitive biases that guide how people interpret information, form beliefs, and resist changing their minds. In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. By understanding the errors in intuition, perception, and memory that can lead people astray and create a tribal mentality, students will strengthen their ability to recognize their own biases and evaluate claims through reason and

evidence. Along the way, we will investigate why so many Americans embrace conspiracy theories, reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus, and accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also examine the production and consumption of false information and how a person can navigate the Wild West of claims and counterclaims easily accessible online.

Learning Objectives:

- To develop the traits of intellectual humility and intellectual honesty
- To gain a historical understanding of major approaches to knowing what's true
- To see how political identities and features of the human mind pose challenges to the search for truth
- To investigate institutions such as universities, science, the media, and courts as venues for truth-seeking

Covid-19 adjustments

The course will follow all UW policies with respect to Covid-19. These policies could well change during the quarter. Covid information, guidelines, and policies for students can be found here: <https://www.washington.edu/coronavirus/student-faq/>

In-person, no recordings:

The course will be in-person, without recordings. Copies of all lecture slides will be posted at the course's Canvas page shortly after each class session. Thus, if you need to miss a class, you will have access to the notes from it.

Workload:

Students should expect a higher-than-average workload in keeping up with the weekly readings, videos, and podcasts, along with the required assignments.

Religious Accommodations:

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy, <https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form, available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

Disability Accommodations:

Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary or permanent disability that requires accommodations (this includes but is not limited to mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, and physical or health impacts), please contact DRS at 206-543-8924, or uwdrs@uw.edu. See also the DRS website at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>

Academic Honesty:

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. A suspected instance will be reported and disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington's academic honesty policy, see <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/academic-misconduct/>

Plagiarism and Turnitin:

The UW has a license agreement with Turnitin, an educational tool that helps prevent or identify plagiarism from Internet resources. Your instructor will use the service by requiring that assignments are submitted electronically through Canvas and checked by Turnitin. The Turnitin report indicates the amount of original text in your work and whether all material that you quoted, paraphrased, summarized, or used from another source is appropriately referenced.

Other Course Policies:

1. In cases of illness and other extenuating circumstances, the instructor will consider requests for a deadline extension or a makeup exam, so long as a student makes the request ahead of time. The instructor will not look favorably upon requests received after a deadline has passed.
2. In cases where a student encounters an emergency within four hours of a deadline and needs to ask for an extension, the student's request will include (as an attachment) the work they have completed so far, which could include notes, an outline, and/or a draft.
3. Cases of cheating and plagiarism will be referred to UW's Community Standards and Student Conduct Office.
4. Once an in-person exam begins, a student will not be allowed to leave the room until they submit the exam.
5. A grade of incomplete for the quarter will be given only in cases where a student has been doing satisfactory work up until the last two weeks.
6. Unless authorized through Disability Resources for Students (DRS), students are not permitted to make recordings of lectures or sections.

Course requirements and grading breakdown:

The grading is based primarily on weekly response memos, a paper, a midterm exam, and a final exam. The paper will require students to engage with materials from the course.

Acknowledgment of course policies: 1%

Weekly response memos: 14%

Midterm exam: 25%

Paper: 30%

Final exam: 30%

You will submit your papers through Turnitin, a program that organizes online submissions and assists in detecting plagiarism.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Note: Particular authors appear on the syllabus not because the instructor necessarily endorses them but because they are relevant to the course. Some of the readings, videos, and podcasts may change as the quarter moves forward. You will always receive notice of any changes at least one class session in advance.

Thursday, September 29 Introduction to the class

Read/listen/watch:

Stephen Colbert, *The Word—Truthiness*, 2005 (just the first segment lasting 2:40, not the whole episode)

Kendra Cherry, *How To Be Open-Minded*, 2022

Kathryn Schulz, *On Being Wrong*, 2011

Van Jones, *Safe Spaces on College Campuses*, 2017

Robert George and Cornel West, *Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression*, 2017

The Economist, *From Congo to the Capitol, Conspiracy Theories Are Surging*, 2021

Friday, September 30 Introduction to your Friday sections

Part I: Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Approaches to Truth

Tuesday, October 4 Premodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Thomas Aquinas, *The Sin of Blasphemy*, 1269 (approximately)

Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*, 1864. Focus on #s 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 21, 55, 77, 78, and 80, and remember that these are propositions Pope Pius IX is *condemning*

Answers in Genesis, *Can We Prove the Bible is True?*, 2011

Catholic Answers, *Papal Infallibility*, 2004

Albert Mohler, *Postmodernism and Society*, 2015

Wednesday, October 5

Acknowledgment of class policies due

Thursday, October 6 Modern approaches to truth

Response memo #1 due

Read/listen/watch:

Skeptics Society, *What Is A Skeptic?*, 2013

Lee McIntyre, *The Case for Science*, 2019

Melanie Trecek-King, *A Life Preserver for Staying Afloat in a Sea of Misinformation*, 2022

Frederick Douglass, *Plea for Freedom of Speech in Boston*, 1860

Jonathan Zimmerman, *Why Free Speech?*, 2021

Julia Galef, *Why ‘Scout Mindset’ Is Crucial to Good Judgment*, 2016

Irshad Manji, *Rethinking Life on the Left*, 2019

Friday, October 7 Premodern and modern approaches to truth

Tuesday, October 11 Postmodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 1967

Reza Aslan, interview on *The Daily Show*, 2015

Jesse Singal, *Reza Aslan on What the New Atheists Get Wrong about Islam*, 2014

Ross Douthat, *How Michel Foucault Lost the Left and Won the Right*, 2021

Helen Pluckrose, *The Evolution of Postmodern Thought*, 2020

Part II: How Individuals Pursue Truth and the Ways They Can Fail

Thursday, October 13 Fallacies and biases that undermine reasoning

Response memo #2 due

Read/listen/watch:

Evan Thompson, *10 Logical Fallacies You Should Know before Getting into a Debate*, 2022

Carol Tavris, *Why We Believe—Long After We Shouldn't*, 2017

David Robson, *The Intelligence Trap*, interviewed on *The Middle Way Society*, 2019

Scott Lilienfeld, *Intellectual Humility: A Guiding Principle for the Skeptical Movement?*, 2020

Friday, October 14 Postmodern approaches to truth; fallacies and biases

Tuesday, October 18 Flaws in intuition

Read/listen/watch:

Laurie Santos, *How Monkeys Mirror Human Irrationality*, 2010

Annie Duke, *Thinking in Bets*, interviewed by Julia Galef on *Rationally Speaking*, 2018

Emily Pronin, *The Double Standard*, interviewed on *Hidden Brain*, 2021

Thursday, October 20 Flaws in perception and memory

Response memo #3 due

Read/listen/watch:

Daniel Simons, *Seeing the World As It Isn't*, 2011

Elizabeth Loftus, *How Reliable Is Your Memory*, 2013

Jennifer Sey, *Doctor's Orders*, 2022

Julian Sanchez, *Don't Do Your Own Research*, 2021

Friday, October 21 Intuition, perception, and memory in the search for truth

Tuesday, October 25 Origins and effects of political polarization

Read/listen/watch:

Cass Sunstein, *The Polarization of Extremes*, 2007

Thomas Edsall, *America, We Have a Problem: The Rise of 'Political Sectarianism' Is Putting Us All in Danger*, 2020

Yascha Mounk, *The Perils of 180ism*, 2021
Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, *The Real Divide in America Is between Political Junkies and Everyone Else*, 2020
Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, interviewed by Russ Roberts on *Econtalk*, 2018

Thursday, October 27 Tribalism and truth

No response memo due this week

Read/listen/watch:

Tom Jacobs, *Why We Engage in Tribalism, Nationalism, and Scapegoating*, 2018
Ezra Klein, *How Politics Makes Us Stupid*, 2014
Christine Emba, *Joe Biden Working While Covid-Sick Was Not ‘White Supremacy,’* 2022
Jerry Taylor, *The Alternative to Ideology*, 2018
Hyrum Lewis, *Our Big Fight Over Nothing: The Political Spectrum Does Not Exist*, 2020
Verlan Lewis and Hyrum Lewis, *The Myth of Ideological Polarization*, 2022

Friday, October 28 Polarization, tribalism, and truth

Tuesday, November 1 Midterm exam

Thursday, November 3 The limits of individual rationality

Response memo #4 due

Read/listen/watch:

Robert Kurzban, *Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite*, talk at *The Amazing Meeting*, 2014
Edge, *The Argumentative Theory, A Conversation with Hugo Mercier*, 2011
Kat Rosenfield, *Why I Keep Getting Mistaken for a Conservative*, 2022
Isaac Stanley-Becker, *Elon Musk, Right-Wing Figures Push Misinformation about Pelosi Attack*, 2022
Bonnie Kristien and Jonathan Rauch, *On the Knowledge Crisis*, 2022

Friday, November 4 Individual rationality; reflections on the course so far

Part III: Truth-Seeking Institutions and Their Limitations

Tuesday, November 8 Experts and science

Read/listen/watch:

Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, talk at *Politics and Prose bookstore*, 2017
Naomi Oreskes, *Why Trust Science?*, 2021
Oliver Traldi, *With All Due Respect to the Experts*, 2022
Jeffrey Singer, *Against Scientific Gatekeeping*, 2022

Thursday, November 10 Science denial on the left and right

Response memo #5 due

Read/listen/watch:

Luana Maroja, *Self-Censorship on Campus is Bad for Science*, 2019
Jerry Taylor, *A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides*, interviewed by Indre Viskontas on *Inquiring Minds*, 2017

Barbara Hofer and Gale Sinatra, *Science Denial: Why It Happens and What to Do about It*, 2022

Friday, November 11 No class (Veterans' Day)

Tuesday, November 15 Limitations of scientific institutions and practices

Read/listen/watch:

Jonathan Rauch, *The Danger of Politicizing Science*, 2022

Vinay Prasad, *Science Editor in Chief Holden Thorpe Condemns DeSantis and Ladapo*, 2022

Stuart Ritchie, *When Science Goes Wrong*, 2022

Thursday, November 17 Universities and truth

Response memo #6 due

Read/listen/watch:

University of Chicago, *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression*, 2014

MIT *Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom*, 2022

American Association of University Professors, *Statement on Professional Ethics*, 2009

Musa al-Gharbi, *On the Relationship between Ideological and Demographic Diversity*, 2019

Jonathan Marks, *The Right-Wing Outrage Machine Is Doing Campus Conservatives No Favors*, 2022

Heterodox Academy, *Understanding the Campus Expression Climate, Three-Year Report*, 2022

Lara Schwartz, *False Equivalence*, interviewed by Chris Martin on *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, 2019

Friday, November 18 Universities, science, and science denial

Monday, November 21 Paper due

Tuesday, November 22 Does (or can) the news media uncover truth?

Read/listen/watch:

Society of Professional Journalists, *Code of Ethics*, 1926 version

Society of Professional Journalists, *Code of Ethics*, 2014 version

Associated Press, *Statement of News Values and Principles*, 2018

American Press Institute, *The Lost Meaning of 'Objectivity'*, 2022

Brent Cunningham, *Re-thinking Objectivity*, 2003

Wesley Lowery, *A Reckoning over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists*, 2020

Jesse Singal, *How the Media Fell for a Racism Sham*, 2022

Thursday, November 24 (no class—Thanksgiving break)

Friday, November 25 (no class—Thanksgiving break)

Tuesday, November 29 Objectivity and subjectivity in the news media; moral truths

Read/listen/watch:

Danah Boyd, *Did Media Literacy Backfire?*, 2017

The Onion, CNN Holds Morning Meeting to Decide What Viewers Should Panic about for Rest of Day, 2014

Carolyn Hax, Learning to Cope in a Chaotic World, 2020

Russ Shafer-Landau, Metaethics and Moral Realism, 2022

Thursday, December 1 Courts as venues for truth-seeking

Response memo #7 due

Read/listen/watch:

Thomas Harper, On Pleasurable Beliefs, 2021

Lindsay Beyerstein, On Bullshit: Harry Frankfurt, Donald Trump, and Indifference to Truth, 2016

Friday, December 2 The media and courts

Tuesday, December 6 Polarization and truth-seeking during the Covid pandemic

Read/listen/watch:

Faye Flam, The Biggest Mistake of the Pandemic Is Still Haunting Us, 2022

Kerrington Powell and Vinay Prasad, The Noble Lies of Covid-19, 2021

Soumya Karlamangla, Once Known for Vaccine Skeptics, Marin Now Tells Them ‘You’re Not Welcome’, 2022

Joss Fong, How American Conservatives Turned Against the Vaccine, 2022

Olivia Goldhill, Pushed by Right-Wing Doctor Groups, Desperate Patients Turn to Ivermectin for Long Covid, 2022

Kay Lazar, Prominent Doctor Faces Backlash Amid ‘Fight Over the Heart of Public Health’, 2022

Thursday, December 8 Individual and institutional means of truth-seeking amid misinformation

No response memo due this week

Read/listen/watch:

Shira Ovide, YouTube’s Ban on Misinformation, 2021

Sarah McQuate and Jackson Holtz, It’s Not Just Social Media—Misinformation Can Spread in Scientific Communication Too, 2021

Faye Flam, Fact-Checking Covid-19 Posts Isn’t Working, 2022

Gina Neff, We Need a Radical New Approach to Tackle Scientific Misinformation Online, 2022

Isaac Saul, Misinformation Is Here to Stay (And That’s OK), 2022

Nico Grant and Tiffany Hsu, Google Finds ‘Inoculating’ People against Misinformation Helps Blunt its Power, 2022

Zubin Damania, California’s Covid Medical Misinformation Bill, 2022

Ryan Long, I Joined the Disinformation Governance Board, 2022

Friday, December 9 Course review

Thursday, December 15 Final exam (covering material since the midterm exam) from 4:30-6:20