

Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, Social Media: The Changing Media Landscape

POLS 310-01 // Spring 2019 // Morse-Ingersoll Hall 207 // MWF 2:00 PM – 3:50 PM //

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Office: Morse-Ingersoll 7 // Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description

This course focuses on new literature in political science on misinformation and disinformation. We look at the positive and negative influence of social media and seek to understand how the rapidly changing media environment affects the beliefs and actions of American citizens. We'll take a pluralistic approach, with readings from academics as well as political practitioners reflecting on the importance of trust in the media and media independence in the Internet era. After the first portion of the course on media and misinformation, the second half of the course will feature student-curated segments of class, with a focus on scholarship produced in the last 5 to 7 years on topics chosen by the students.

Course Objectives

By the end of this semester, you should be able to:

- Understand and describe a variety of psychological and sociological factors that influence how we perceive the media
- Analyze and explain the role of the media in shaping political outcomes in America
- Develop a research idea and compose an independent research paper

Structure of the Class

As your senior capstone experience, this class is devoted almost entirely to student-led discussion. You are expected to have read the readings carefully, taken detailed notes, and be prepared to discuss the findings in detail for the majority of the class period. Think of this as a culmination of all of your work in political science. Your job in this class is to tie together the readings with what you have learned over your previous semesters here at Beloit.

Later in the semester, certain weeks will be devoted to student-driven topics. You'll work together in groups to develop these topics, which should be related to one of the major themes of the class.

Finally, because a major component of this course is your final paper, Fridays are largely devoted to writing workshops. Some weeks we'll meet as a full class to workshop ideas or writing, other times we'll meet in smaller groups. These workshop days are designed to help you write a high quality final paper.

Office Hours and Help

I'm trying something new with this class and not holding scheduled office hours. Instead, I'll ask you to schedule time with me when you would like to talk. In addition, our writing workshop days are a good time to ask questions.

I strive to make this course understandable and accessible for all students. If you have any questions about the content or structure of the course or about specific assignments, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am always happy to help if you come to me before assignments or exams are due. Please do not wait to ask for help until after the due date, come talk to me before if you are struggling.

Required Texts

This class will feature mostly academic books and articles. The required books are listed below and are available at the college bookstore or from Amazon or other places online. Readings are available on the class Moodle site at:

<https://moodle1819.beloit.edu/course/view.php?id=1084>

There are three required books for the course:

Hall, Thad & Betsy Sinclair. (2019). *A Connected America*.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. (2018). *Cyberwar*.

Uscinski, Joseph & Joseph Parent. (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*.

Grading

Grades are based on four different components, described in more detail below. 50% of your grade will come from a research paper on a topic you decide on, in consultation with Phil (1). An additional 10% of your grade will come from response essays (2). 30% of your grade consists of class citizenship (3). Finally, 5% of your grade consists of your group class design and facilitation (4) and 5% consists of a presentation on your research paper (5).

Response Essays	10%
Research Paper	
Research Questions	Required for Grade
Lit Review/Annotated Bibliography	Required for Grade
Rough Draft	Required for Grade
Peer Review Participation	Required for Grade
Paper Conference Attendance	Required for Grade
Final Paper	50%
Presentation	5%
Class Citizenship	30%
Class Design and Facilitation	5%

Response Essays (10%) – Each student will complete two response essays on the readings for a specific day. You will have an opportunity to pick the class sessions that you would like to write about.

In addition to writing your essays, you will also serve as a discussion leader for the days that you write on. While you won't be in charge of the entire class, I'll expect you to have in-depth knowledge about the readings and to come prepared with specific topics and questions you would like to discuss in class. We'll start each class with time for the discussion leader to frame the day's discussion. We'll talk more in class about what serving as discussion leader entails.

Response essays are due to me **by 8:00 AM on the day of class.**

Each paper should include a brief summary of the arguments in the reading(s) (no more than two paragraphs) and a critique of the argument, evidence, and conclusions. Papers should be approximately 3 pages long, double spaced. I will distribute a separate handout with more information about this assignment.

Research Paper (50%) – Over the course of the semester, you will develop and write a substantial, original research paper on a topic that you develop in consultation with Phil. While you are welcome to write on something connected to the themes in the class, you are not required or expected to. This should be a topic *in political science* that you find interesting and would like to research.

Because you will work on this paper throughout the course of the semester, my expectations are high; this should be the best paper you write at Beloit.

Below are some requirements for the paper:

- Papers must be 22 to 25 pages in length, typed, in Times New Roman font, size 12, double spaced with 1-inch margins. If you are writing an honors project, your paper must meet the same formatting guidelines, but must be *at least* 40 pages in length.
- You must use a multitude of academic sources (at least 15-20), including articles, books, and primary source material. News articles and opinion pieces are not considered academic sources (unless that are the primary sources for your analysis).
- You will use author-date citations in the text of your paper and your bibliography must follow either APA, MLA, or Chicago style. I'll provide some guidelines for this, but I highly suggest you use this as a chance to learn a citation management system. I highly recommend Zotero, which is free and integrates well with Microsoft Word and Google Docs.
- There are numerous intermediate components designed to “scaffold” the writing process and help you develop your topic and research. These are marked as “Required for Grade” above. These pieces of the paper can be thought of as low stakes requirements. Failing to turn in these assignments will lower your final paper grade by 1/3 of a letter grade for each missing piece. For instance, if your grade for the entire paper was a B+, but you failed to turn in your research questions, your final grade for the paper would be a B. If you were missing both the research questions and lit review, your B+ would become a B-.

Presentation (5%) – During the last several class sessions, each student will give a 10 minute (approximately) presentation on their research paper, with each presentation followed by 5 to 10 minutes of question and answer discussion with the class. You may choose to emphasize any part of the research you conducted, as long as you give us an idea of how it fits into the larger paper/project. If you are doing honors, I'll ask you to talk with me about scheduling an early presentation day so you can practice before your departmental defense.

Class Citizenship (30%) – I care about your attendance and role in this class, as the class will be entirely discussion based. The class will be most rewarding if you attend regularly and are an active citizen. I expect you to come on time, to listen, and to participate. I will hand out a sheet for everyone to sign in at the start of class. If you are late to class, please check with me after class to make sure I've recorded your attendance for the day. After two unexcused absences, your class citizenship component will decrease.

Class citizenship, however, entails more than just showing up for class, it also means participating in class and being prepared to discuss all of the readings. This course is organized and run as a pseudo-graduate level seminar, which means the emphasis is on *student-led* discussions and analysis of the assigned readings. Therefore, it is imperative that you complete the readings and familiarize yourself with the main points/issues they raise.

Note: this does not require you to “understand” or “get” the readings entirely. You will have times when you don't fully understand the argument the author is making, and that's ok. This is about investigating and critically thinking about the arguments, not simply understanding and regurgitating arguments.

An essential part of your class citizenship grade is **contributing two discussion questions to Moodle for each Monday and Wednesday class session, no later than noon on the day of class**. These should be substantive, analytical questions for us to debate in class, not content-based questions about the readings. These will form the basis of class discussions for the day. However, I understand that sometimes things come up that prevent you from turning things in. Just like attendance, your grade will not suffer if you miss two or fewer discussion question days. Any more than that, and your grade will decline.

I do want you to know that I understand participation can take a lot of different forms. You might ask questions when things are unclear, raise ideas about things the author overlooked, share your opinion, visit my office to ask question, contribute to class discussions without monopolizing conversations, paying attention to me and your classmates, and taking risks with questions that don't have clear answers. Participation *does not* mean only talking – it can also mean being an active participant in the space of the classroom. I also understand that speaking in class can be challenging, so there will be different types of discussion in class to encourage you to participate.

Finally, class citizenship means being receptive, interested, and respectful of your fellow classmates' ideas. Disagreement will happen, with your classmates, and with me. That's good! It can be a really productive thing if we disagree collegially.

I reserve the right to institute reading quizzes if I don't think people are doing the readings, but I'd rather not do this.

Class Facilitation (5%) – In the final few weeks of class, students will have a chance (in groups) to facilitate a week of class on a topic of your choosing in American politics. You will be in charge of class for that week, with Phil playing a supporting role at most. You should feel free to structure the class however your group sees fit, as long as the plan is connected with discussing and evaluating a set of academic readings. Class sessions usually feature large and small group discussions, guided discussion questions, and short in-class writing. Other activities you might consider include (but are not limited to) structured debates, paired discussions, games, simulations, etc. Keep in mind that the goal is discussion, not just having people repeat what the author(s) said. You need to be able to sustain discussion for the whole session.

As a group, you will meet with Phil before your class session, but I also recommend you consult with me, either in-person as a group or by email, before our meeting.

I understand group projects can be stressful and there is a tendency for some individuals to do less work than others. One advantage of small classes is that I am able to observe the contributions of individual students to the group. I will not assign a single group grade, but rather will give individual grades based on the quality of the class facilitation and your individual performance. If you are concerned that you are doing too much of the work for the group or are doing behind the scenes work that I may not notice, please come talk to me!

Grade Scale:

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	<60

Grading – On some assignments, you may receive a grade of B+/A- or something like that. This is just my shorthand way of assigning a number grade between two letter grades. Thus, an A grade is recorded in the grade book as 100 points while an A- grade is recorded as 92 points. If I think your work fell between these points, you may get an A-/A, which would be recorded as 96 points. So a A-/A is technically an A grade, but in the middle of the A range instead of the high end.

When calculating final grades, I always round up. So an 88.7% in the class becomes an 89% (B+), but an 89.1% would be rounded up to a 90% (A-).

Course Schedule:
Days with reading quizzes marked with (RQ)

Introduction

- January 21 Class Introduction – No Readings
- January 23 Read: Graber Ch. 4*
 Bonilla & Rosa 2015*
 Christakis & Fowler Ch. 6*
- January 25 Writing Workshop – Coming up with an idea (Full Class)
 Read: Baglione Ch. 2*

Social and New Media

- January 28 Read: Sunstein 2018*
 Stroud Ch. 7*
 Hall & Sinclair Ch. 1
- January 30 Read: Hall & Sinclair Ch. 2
 Hall & Sinclair Ch. 3
 Prior 2005*
- February 1 **DUE: Research Question (End of Class)**
 Writing Workshop – Research Question and Lit Reviews (Full Class)
 Read: Baglione Ch. 3*
 Baglione Ch. 4*
- February 4 Read: Hall & Sinclair Ch. 4
 Hall & Sinclair Ch. 5
 Heflick 2017*
 Braucher 2016*
- February 6 Read: Hall & Sinclair Ch. 6
 Hall & Sinclair Ch. 7
 Levendusky Ch. 7*
- February 8 Writing Workshop – Lit Review/Annotated Bibliography (Group #1)

Russian Hacking

- February 11 Read: Jamieson Introduction
 Jamieson Ch. 1
 Jamieson Ch. 2

- February 13 Read: Matishak 2018*
 Barnes 2018*
 Shane 2018*
 Jamieson Ch. 3
 Jamieson Ch. 4
- February 15 Writing Workshop – Lit Review/Annotated Bibliography (Group #2)
- February 18 Read: Jamieson Ch. 5
 Jamieson Ch. 6
 Jamieson Ch. 7
- February 20 Read: Jamieson Ch. 8
 Jamieson Ch. 9
 Jamieson Ch. 10
 Jamieson Afterword
- February 22 NO CLASS – Writing Day

Declining Trust in the Media and Science

- February 25 Read: Lazar et. al 2018*
 Knight Foundation 2018*
 Mutz Ch. 4*
 Nyhan & Reifler 2012*
 Malka et. al 2009*
- February 27 **DUE: Lit Review/Annotated Bibliography**
 Read: Suhay & Druckman 2015*
 Nisbet et. al 2015*
 Bolsen et. al 2015*
 Saunders 2017*
- March 1 Writing Workshop – Peer Review (Full Class)
- March 4 Read: Fowler & Gollust 2015*
 Oliver & Wood 2014a*
 Motta et. al 2018*
 Chen & Luttig*
- March 6 Read: Gaines et. al 2007*
 Nyhan & Reifler 2010*
 Nyhan et. al 2014*
 Kolbert 2017*
- March 8 NO CLASS – Writing Day

Spring Break – NO CLASS

March 11, 13, 15

Conspiracy Theories

- March 18 Read: Sunstein & Vermeule 2009*
 Hofstadter 1965*
 Uscinski & Parent Ch. 1
- March 20 Joel Simon Visit (2:35-3:50)
 Read: Uscinski & Parent Ch. 2
 Other Readings TBD
- March 22 Writing Workshop – Talking about Findings (Full Class)
 Read: Readings TBD
- March 25 Read: Uscinski & Parent Ch. 3
 Uscinski & Parent Ch. 4
- March 27 Read: Abalakina-Paap et. al 1999*
 Wood et. al 2012*
 Swami & Coles 2010*
 Flynn et. al 2017*
- March 29 NO CLASS (Advising Practicum)
- April 1 Read: Uscinski & Parent Ch. 5
 Uscinski & Parent Ch. 6
- April 3 **DUE: LESSON PLAN DRAFTS (Both Groups)**
 Read: Prior et. al 2015*
 Chen & Mohanty 2017*
 Nyhan 2012*
- April 5 NO CLASS (Professor at Conference)
- April 8 Read: Uscinski & Parent Ch. 7
 Shin et. al 2017*
 Lee 2016*
- April 10 **DUE: ROUGH DRAFT**
 Read: Blank & Shaw 2015*
 Pasek et. al 2015*
 Miller et. al 2016*
- April 12 Class Prep Workshop (Group #1)

Student Led Week #1

April 15 Read: TBD

April 17 Read: TBD

April 19 **DUE: Peer Review**
Writing Workshop – Peer Review (Full Class)

Implications for Democracy

April 22 Read: Hochschild & Einstein Ch. 5*
Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon 2008*
Jolley & Douglas 2012*
Jolley & Douglas 2014*

April 24 NO CLASS (Spring Day)

April 26 Class Prep Workshop (Group #2)

Student Led Week # 2

April 29 Read: TBD

May 1 Read: TBD

Concluding the Semester

May 3 Poster Presentations – No Readings

May 6 Poster Presentations – No Readings

May 8 Last Day of Class! – No Readings

May 13 **DUE: Final Draft, by 5:00 PM**

Course Policies

Attendance: Regular attendance is vital for your success in this course. I understand, however, that sometimes circumstances prevent you from coming to class. Missing one class will not destroy your participation grade; missing several will.

Late Work: Assignments are due at the **beginning of class** on the day they are listed as due. Any assignments turned in after this time will be subject to the following late penalty: For each day late, I will deduct a third of a letter grade. So if an assignment is due Friday and you turn it in after class on Friday, a B+ paper would receive a B. If you turn it in Saturday, it would be a B-, Monday would be a C.

Assignments should be turned in using the Moodle system unless otherwise noted.

Grade Changes: Any appeals of a grade must be made at least **24 hours after** I hand back an assignment or exam. If you would like to appeal the grade you got on an assignment, prior to meeting with me you must submit a written statement detailing why you think your grade should be changed. I will then meet with you to discuss your statement and why you think your grade should be changed.

If I make a mistake in totaling your grade for an exam or assignment (e.g. I added the points up incorrectly) then you do not need to write a statement or wait 24 hours. Just talk to me after class or during office hours and I'll double check and fix the mistake.

Contacting the Professor: I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course, readings, and assignments. In general, quick clarification questions can be handled over email. More in-depth questions are best discussed in person during my office hours, where we can have an actual conversation. If my office hours conflict with your class or work schedule, I am available by appointment as well.

Please allow a full 24 hours for an email response. Often, my responses will be quicker than this, but do not send multiple emails about the same request until 24 hours have passed. I cannot guarantee that if you email me right before an assignment or exam that I will be able to answer your question in time, so please make sure and email me early if you have a time-specific question.

Extra Credit and Retakes: There is no scheduled extra credit in this course. You may not retake quizzes. There may be opportunities for extra credit, however.

Disability Services and Accommodations: If you have a disability and need accommodations, contact Learning Enrichment and Disability Services (LEADS) located on 2nd floor Pearsons (north side), [608-363-2572](tel:608-363-2572), learning@beloit.edu, or make an appointment through joydeleon.youcanbook.me. For accommodations in my class, you must bring me an Access Letter from the Director of LEADS and then we will discuss how to implement the accommodations. Contact that office promptly; accommodations are not retroactive. Free peer tutoring is available for most classes. For a tutor, apply by going to your Portal, to the Student Life tab, and then apply using the Tutoring Forms (on left) and Request a Tutor. If you have any questions, contact LEADS.

Inclusivity: **Inclusivity** is a demonstration of equity and social justice through awareness, understanding, and respect for the differences in identity, culture, background, experience, and socialization, and the ways in which these forms of difference impact how we live and learn. Inclusivity requires equitable, institution-wide representation and access to resources. In practice, this manifests itself by each individual being aware of, committed to, and responsible for the well-being and care of all students, staff, and faculty.