GOVT 4000 Major Seminar: The Truth About Fake News

Instructor: Dr. Alexandra Cirone
Email: aec287@cornell.edu

Misinformation is now a feature of modern politics, but to what extent does fake news interfere with our ability to separate fact from fiction? This major seminar will look at the historical antecedents of fake news, and the foundations of modern day free speech, before covering how unprecedented access to information via digital content, the internet, and social media has changed our current news consumption. It will also survey academic studies in political behavior that analyze both how individuals consume political information from social media, and how partisanship and polarization are making the problem worse. It will also cover how fake news works in other parts of the world, in both developing and non-developing regimes. The course will conclude by discussing the nascent policy solutions to combat the spread of fake news. Students will engage these issues using analytical writing, group projects, and structured debates. Through readings, discussions, and written assignments, students will learn how to better evaluate evidence when it comes to misinformation.

![20TH CENTURY HEADLINES](https://xkcd.com/1283/)
**Requirements**

Generally, students are required to attend all class meetings, to come to seminar having read and thought about the assigned material for the week, and to participate actively in class activities. Full attendance is expected, if a student misses more than 3 classes without consultation with the professor, the overall class grade will decrease by a third of a grade.

The grade will be composed of the following elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Short Paper I</td>
<td>February 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Short Paper II</td>
<td>March 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Group Presentation</td>
<td>March 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Long Paper</td>
<td>May TBD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics for the short and long papers will be distributed in class. Papers are due to be submitted electronically before the start of the class on the specified deadlines. Late assignments will be marked down a third of a grade (such as from A to A-) for each day following the due date. All assignments are designed to be pieces of analytical writing, drawing upon leading academic research, policy analysis, or evidence derived from available data. All claims must be fully supported, and cited appropriately.

**Ethics**

The course follows the general principles established in the Cornell Code of Academic Integrity; see [https://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm](https://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm). Cheating, plagiarism, and other offenses outlined in the code will not be permitted and will resuming in failing grade. Students must complete and submit individual assignments, there are no collective assessments. Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.
ACCESS

Students with Disabilities: Your access in this course is important. Please give me your Student Disability Services (SDS) accommodation letter early in the semester so that we have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations. If you need an immediate accommodation, please speak with me after class or send an email to me and/or SDS at sds_cu@cornell.edu. If the need arises for additional accommodations during the semester, please contact SDS. SDS is located on level 5 of Cornell Health, 110 Ho Plaza, 607-254-4545, sds.cornell.edu.

All students: Your mental health is important. If you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, or encounter any difficulties during the semester, you can either come to me (and we’ll find a solution) or you can (confidentially) consult the Cornell mental health services. See: https://health.cornell.edu/services/mental-health-care for information on how to stop by, or you can even call a licensed therapist directly from the on-call service: 607-255-5155 (option #2).

Office Hours: These are a chance for you to come consult with me about the topics in the course, assignments, or if you need more general academic help or advice. You can sign up for a 15 minute slot on calendly.com/cirone, or please email for an alternative appointment time.

NOTE

This syllabus is a “living document” and is subject to revision as the course goes on. Please consult with me before reading more than a week ahead!
## Schedule

Lecture will begin January 22. There will be no class on March 18th, or April 1st.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>January 22</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>January 29</td>
<td>Historical Uses of Misinformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>February 5</td>
<td>Modern Misinformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>February 12</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: NYT Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>February 19</td>
<td>Political Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>February 26</td>
<td>2016 US Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>March 4</td>
<td>Challenges to Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>March 11</td>
<td>Rapid Fire Debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>March 18</td>
<td>NO CLASS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>March 25</td>
<td>Policy Solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>April 1</td>
<td>NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>April 8</td>
<td>Visit to Survey Data in the Information Age, to see Joe Twyman Speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>April 22</td>
<td>Non-Democratic Regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>April 29</td>
<td>Documentary Screening: Under the Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May TBD</td>
<td></td>
<td>Long Paper Due</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Readings**

All readings are academic journal articles, newspaper articles, or reports that can be accessed online or on Canvas. However, for your future scholarly development, I recommend you invest in buying the following (click for Amazon links):


---

**January 22**  
**Introduction**


---

**January 29**  
**Historical Uses of Misinformation and Free Speech**


February 5  **Modern Misinformation**


February 12  **Outside Speaker: https://as.cornell.edu/news/ny-times-editor-alumnus-first-distinguished-visiting-journalist**

February 19  **Political Behavior**


February 26  **2016 US Election**

Fake News May Have Limited Effects Beyond Increasing Beliefs in False Claims: https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/fake-news-limited-effects-on-political-participation/


March 4  Challenges to Democracy


March 11  Rapid Fire Debate

March 18  NO CLASS

March 25  Policy Solutions (Group Presentations)

April 1  NO CLASS (Spring Break)
April 8  
Visit to “Survey Data in the Information Age” class, to see guest lecture by Joe Twyman

Naked Statistics, Chapters 1-2 (pages 1-36)  
*How to Lie with Statistics, Chapters 1-4 (pages 11-36)*

April 15  
TBD

April 22  
Non-Democratic Regimes


In WhatsApp, fake news is fast – and can be fatal.” Elizabeth Dwoskin and Annie Gowen for the Washington Post, July 23, 2018.

April 29  
Documentary Screening: Under the Sun
