

Fact or Fiction?

School of Journalism and Communication
University of Oregon
Fall 2017

[skip to the course schedule](#)

Instructor

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Course Description

Fact or Fiction is a course about making sense of information in the digital age. In a supposedly “post-truth” moment, how can media creators and consumers alike evaluate information to determine what’s credible? More broadly, what are the forces and factors that shape how we come to understand what’s “fake” and what’s “factual” in an increasingly complex media environment? Now more than ever, amid declining trust in professions and institutions, it matters to understand dynamics of trust, verification, misinformation, propaganda, and the social spread of information. This course will focus on two key areas: (1) an explanation of key cases and controversies—from fake news to the complicated role of Facebook and other platforms—that shape how people perceive matters of fact, and which are relevant for journalism, public relations, advertising, and other media domains; and (2) an introduction to data literacy and numeracy, or the ability to apply basic numerical and statistical concepts. These two broad areas will be applied in evaluating how media workers, such as journalists and strategic communicators, develop notions of truth, ethics, and transparency, among other things. In all, our goal is to equip you with a foundation in media literacy and statistical literacy such that you can be avoid being duped and help others to do the same.

Course Learning Outcomes

This course is designed to help students achieve certain learning outcomes and competencies. At the conclusion of the term, you should be able to:

- Describe and explain key concepts, cases, and controversies related to the creation, circulation, and consumption of news (fake and otherwise), both historically and contemporaneously.
- Identify and interpret key debates regarding objectivity, propaganda, mis/disinformation, news literacy, verification, trust and accountability, and other concerns relevant to media work and media life.

- Articulate and evaluate similarities and differences in approaches to truth among media occupations (e.g., journalism, PR, advertising) and media practices (e.g., documentary filmmaking, photography, data visualization).
- Evaluate the relative benefits and drawbacks of digital media technologies—algorithms, platforms, social media, etc.—for the spread of facts and fakes.
- Define and discuss notions of numeracy, statistical literacy, logical reasoning, and scientific methods.
- Apply class concepts in conducting original research (a digital ethnography) to assess the techniques that media actors use to portray reality.
- Interpret findings from research, apply them to cases that interest you personally and/or professionally, and report and present on these to your colleagues.

Required Course Materials

This course has two required books, which are available at the Duck Store and other bookstores:

Gladstone, B. (2017). [*The trouble with reality: A rumination on moral panic in our time*](#). New York: Workman Publishing.

Levitin, D. J. (2017). [*Weaponized lies: How to think critically in the post-truth era*](#). New York: Dutton.

Additional materials will be available via Canvas and/or via hyperlinks in the course schedule.

Course Structure and Estimated Workload

As noted in the course objectives above, a key purpose of this class is to help you become familiar with contemporary trends and key debates surrounding media literacy and numeracy. To that end, we'll be reading and discussing a good deal of material this term. These readings have been selected as an important entry point into a wider conversation.

Completing the readings—indeed, thoughtfully engaging with them and taking notes about them—will be the most crucial thing you do this term, as it will impact the quality of everything you do, from in-class discussions to quizzes to various projects.

This class will involve synthesizing academic research and news reports, writing papers, peer-reviewing the work of others, and giving presentations both informal and formal on your project work. You will be expected to not only become familiar with the material that we cover in class and via outside readings, but also adept at integrating that material with the world around you—applying your learning as a set of lenses, as it were, through which to see how matters of truth are adjudicated in the media professions and beyond.

Per university policy, one undergraduate term credit hour equals roughly 30 hours of student work—typically, 10 hours in class and 20 hours outside of class.

How grades will be determined

This course is graded for all students. The following chart applies to graded assignments and the final grade. Note that grades will be posted to Canvas (please see the Course Policies section for details on disputing and discussing grades).

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
≥93%	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	59-0

Assignments

* Note: Details about the two major assignments—the group project (case study) and the individual project (digital ethnography)—will be distributed and explained later in the term.

Assignment	Details	% of grade	Due Date
REGULAR PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT (35%)			
In-class exercises (ICE)	All ICE will be distributed and graded at random points during the term. In-class assignments take different forms and often will be done in groups. If a student is absent (without a written, legitimate excuse as approved by the university), no points will be received. Note: If real engagement is evident in the ICE, full points will be awarded; for only partial effort or completion, only partial points will be given.	15%	Randomly given in class
Quizzes	These will be “open note” — that is, you can use <u>your own personal notes</u> , not the books or articles. For this reason, I recommend keeping a notebook where you record key terms, definitions, and points of connection. Try answering these as you read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the essential point of this piece? • How does it <i>define</i> key terms and ideas? • How does it <i>apply</i> those key terms/ideas? • How does this reading connect with other things that we cover in this class? • How would I explain it to a friend? Note: Quizzes are worth 5% each. They are only given at the day and time assigned, unless there is a written, university-approved absence involved.	20%	October 4: Quiz #1 on topics from Weeks 1-2 October 19: Quiz #2 on topics from Weeks 3-4 November 9: Quiz #3 on topics from Weeks 5-7 November 21: Quiz #4 on topics from Week 8
GROUP PROJECT: CASE STUDY ASSIGNMENT (30%)			
Group organization	Groups are assigned and configured during class	--	October 3
Selection of a case study	Discuss this in class; come prepared by reviewing sources such as CJR, Tow Center, Data & Society, Reuters Institute, Pew Research, FirstDraft, etc.	--	October 10
Case study group suggestions and critical comments	First draft of your section: bring several printed copies (~1 full page, single-spaced, font 12, APA) to circulate among group members for their critique	--	November 14
Peer review	Return your group members’ section drafts to them, with suggestions and critical comments	--	November 16
Case study report	Consult the information sheet (distributed in class)	20%	November 28, 11 a.m.
Presentations	Consult the information sheet (distributed in class)	10%	November 28, 30
INDIVIDUAL PROJECT: DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT (35%)			
Weekly observations	3 weekly observations, 5% each; consult the information sheet that will be distributed in class	15%	November 7, 14, 21
Ethnography report	consult the information sheet that will be distributed	20%	December 4, 5 p.m.

Course Schedule

The course is divided into four main components:

1. Weeks 1-2 — Media literacy, the press past and present, and facticity in news
2. Weeks 3-4 — Fake news and manipulation in a platform-centric media ecosystem
3. Weeks 5-7 — Numeracy, data literacy, and scientific approaches to establishing fact
4. Weeks 8-10 — Applying notions of truth in journalism and strategic communication

<i>Topics / Dates</i>	<i>Readings and Deadlines</i>
Week 1 Reality is... complicated	Tuesday, Sept. 26 — Scene 1: The great freak-out about fakes, facts, and truth + Syllabus walk-through, introductions, and get-to-know-you student survey
	Thursday, Sept. 28 — Media literacy and key terms of problematic information Read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Did media literacy backfire?” by danah boyd (2017) • “Fake news. It’s complicated.” by Claire Wardle (2017) Listen: “danah boyd on why fake news is so easy to believe.” <i>The Ezra Klein Show</i> (2017) Optional: Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information , by Caroline Jack (2017)
Week 2 The News Media and the Shaping of Social Reality	Tuesday, Oct. 3 — Just the facts? News, trust, and objectivity + Introduce the group case study assignment; groups organized in class this day Read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What the post-Trump debate over journalism gets wrong,” Brookings Institution, by Tom Rosenstiel (2016) • “Here’s what non-fake news looks like,” <i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>, by Michael Schudson (2017) • “The media’s ‘bubble’ problem is really a diversity problem,” <i>Slate</i>, by Will Oremus (2016) • “The dying art of disagreement,” <i>The New York Times</i>, by Bret Stephens (2017) Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read this whitepaper by Ethan Zuckerman (2017): “Mistrust, efficacy and the new civics: Understanding the deep roots of the crisis of faith in journalism”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For a historical look at how facts were established via communication, consider watching the whimsical “A Matter of Fact: Printing Transforms Knowledge,” an episode of the bygone <i>The Day the Universe Changed</i> • For a glimpse into the changing nature of journalism as it was beginning to unfold a decade ago, amid the rise of blogging and before social media, see PBS <i>Frontline</i>’s “News War,” which describes journalist–source interactions <p>Thursday, Oct. 5 — Fact-checking, verification, bias, and the future of the press</p> <p>Quiz #1 in class this day, on topics from Weeks 1-2</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Trouble with Reality: A Ruminant on Moral Panic in Our Time,” by Brooke Gladstone (2017) (full book) • “Audience atomization overcome: Why the internet weakens the authority of the press,” <i>PressThink</i>, by Jay Rosen (2009) <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read a selection from “Deciding What’s True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism,” by Lucas Graves (2016) (see PDF on Canvas) • Listen to “Upside of the ‘war on journalism,’” OPB’s <i>Think Out Loud</i> (you might recognize the guest being interviewed)
<p>Week 3</p> <p>Fake News and Facebook</p>	<p>Tuesday, Oct. 10 — What is fake news? History, definitions, and cases</p> <p>+ Group project: select a case study this day</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Introduction: Thinking, Critically,” in “Weaponized Lies: How to Think Clearly in the Post-Truth Era,” by Daniel J. Levitin (2017) (~10 pages) • “The Agency: How an army of trolls has tried to wreak havoc on the internet,” <i>New York Times</i>, by Adrian Chen (2015) • “The Macedonian teens who mastered fake news,” WIRED, by Samantha Subramanian (2017) • “My ‘fake news list’ went viral. But made-up stories are only part of the problem,” <i>The Washington Post</i>, by Melissa Zimdars (2016) <p>Listen: “Breaking News,” <i>Radiolab</i>, by Simon Adler</p> <p>Optional: Listen to “Fake News: The Facts,” <i>Intelligence Squared</i></p> <p>Thursday, Oct. 12 — Algorithms and echo chambers: Facebook as a case study</p>

	<p>Listen: “The age of the algorithm,” 99% Invisible</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Facebook is eating the world,” <i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>, by Emily Bell (2016) • “The forces that drove this election’s media failure are likely to get worse,” <i>Nieman Journalism Lab</i>, by Joshua Benton (2016) • “You are the product,” <i>London Review of Books</i>, by John Lanchester (2017) • “Facebook’s war on free will,” <i>Guardian</i>, by Franklin Foer (2017) <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommended read: “The platform metaphor, revisited,” <i>Culture Digitally</i>, by Tarleton Gillespie • PBS <i>Frontline</i>’s “Generation Like,” while already feeling a bit dated only a few years on, remains the best documentary for illustrating the social and economic power of the currency of “likes.”
<p>Week 4</p> <p>Partisanship, Platforms, and Propaganda</p>	<p>Tuesday, Oct. 17 — Tribalism and partisan media ecosystems</p> <p>+ Group meeting: Remember to bring a recent article or other piece to share</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Can our Democracy Survive Tribalism?” <i>New York</i>, by Andrew Sullivan (2017) • “Inside the Partisan Fight for Your News Feed,” <i>BuzzFeed</i>, by Craig Silverman et al. (2017) • “Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda,” <i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>, by Yochai Benkler et al. (2017) • “How the left lost its mind,” <i>The Atlantic</i>, by McKay Coppins (2017) <hr/> <p>Thursday, Oct. 19 — Memes, manipulation, and disinformation: shaping the narrative, from extremist message boards to political bots</p> <p>Quiz #2 in class this day, on topics from Weeks 3-4</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Media manipulation and disinformation online,” <i>Data & Society</i>, by Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis (2017)
<p>Week 5</p> <p>Evaluating Numbers</p>	<p>Tuesday, Oct. 24 — Numeracy, Part 1: Averages, axes, and correlation vs. causation</p> <p>+ Group meeting: Remember to bring a recent article or other piece to share</p> <p>Read: Weaponized Lies, by Levitin (2017), chapters 1-4</p>

	<p>Thursday, Oct. 26 — Numeracy, Part 2: Sampling, probabilities, and more statistics</p> <p>+ Introduce the Digital Ethnography project</p> <p>Read: Weaponized Lies, by Levitin (2017), chapters 5-6</p>
<p>Week 6</p> <p>Data Visualization and Human Interpretation</p>	<p>Tuesday, Oct. 31 — Visualizing numbers and data: the power of illustrations</p> <p>+ Group meeting: Remember to bring a recent article or other piece to share</p> <p>Read: selections from The Truthful Art: Data, Charts, and Maps for Communication, by Alberto Cairo (2016) (see PDF on Canvas)</p> <hr/> <p>Thursday, Nov. 2 — Inconvenient facts, cognitive dissonance, and the stories we tell ourselves: How behavioral tendencies contribute to a polarized society</p> <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why people ‘fly from facts,’” <i>Scientific American</i>, by Troy Campbell • “Who are you calling anti-science?” <i>Scientific American</i>, by Troy Campbell • “7 psychological concepts that explain the Trump era of politics,” by Brian Resnick <p>Guest lecturer: Troy Campbell, University of Oregon assistant professor of marketing, visiting SOJC as part of the Demystifying Media speaker series</p>
<p>Week 7</p> <p>Evaluating Claims in a Scientific Fashion</p>	<p>Tuesday, Nov. 7 — Epistemology and expertise: how do we know?</p> <p>+ Group meeting: Remember to bring a recent article or other piece to share</p> <p>Due: Digital Ethnography observations, Week 1</p> <p>Read: Weaponized Lies, by Levitin (2017), chapters 7-10</p> <hr/> <p>Thursday, Nov. 9 — Scientific reasoning, logical fallacies, and spotting fake science</p> <p>Quiz #3 in class this day, on topics from Weeks 5-7</p> <p>Read: Weaponized Lies, by Levitin (2017), chapters 11-14</p>

Week 8 Truth Across Professions and Practices	Tuesday, Nov. 14 — Negotiating ‘truth’ in journalism and strategic communication, Part 1: the ethics of documentary filmmaking + Group meeting to share drafts and discuss the peer feedback process Due: Initial draft of one’s case study section—printed and shared with group members Due: Digital Ethnography observations, Week 2 Read: TBD Guest Lecturer: Jesse Abdenour, SOJC assistant professor of journalism
	Thursday, Nov. 16 — Negotiating ‘truth’ in journalism and strategic communication, Part 2: the ethics of photo manipulation + Group meeting to exchange and discuss written feedback on initial drafts Due: Peer feedback for group members Read: TBD Guest Lecturer: Tom Wheeler, SOJC professor of journalism
Week 9 Project Work	Tuesday, Nov. 21 — Review / catch-up — and consultations on the group projects + Group meeting to finalize the case study project and compile a single document Due: Digital Ethnography observations, Week 3 Quiz #4 on topics from Week 8 Read: TBD
	Thursday, Nov. 23 — THANKSGIVING BREAK
Week 10 Student Presentations and Future Directions	Tuesday, Nov. 28 — Student presentations, Part 1 Due: Group case study, in written and presentation form, by Nov. 28 at 11 a.m. ; see the information sheet for complete details on what and how to submit. + Group presentations begin this day and continue the following class period

	<p>Thursday, Nov. 30 — Student presentations, Part 2</p> <p>+ Concluding remarks about the future of media literacy, numeracy, and facticity</p>
FINALS WEEK	<p>Due: Note that, in lieu of a final exam, the Digital Ethnography Report is due on the day that we otherwise would have had a final—Monday, December 4, at 5 p.m. See the information sheet for complete details on what and how to submit.</p>

Course Policies

Attendance

Regular attendance is crucial for your success in this class and for creating a positive learning environment for everyone. And, per UO and SOJC policy, attendance is mandatory. You are expected to be in class, be on time, and stay through the end of class. *If you leave class early or arrive more than 5 minutes late, you will not be allowed to receive credit for a quiz or in-class exercise that day.* If you have an emergency or a University-approved reason for missing class, please notify the professor in advance and provide documentation; otherwise, absences are assumed to be unexcused. (See also the policy below regarding late and make-up work.) If you miss a class, ask another student for material you may have missed.

Inclement weather

In connection to the above policy on attendance, we will adjust our schedule and cancel class when necessary if there is bad weather during winter, as determined by the University. Make sure you have signed up to receive text alerts from UO to follow any changes to the campus schedule.

Technology in the classroom

Technology is such an important (and often overwhelming) part of our everyday lives—and issues of technology are front-and-center for this class. But that doesn't mean that technology is necessarily better in all circumstances. In fact, [research](#) has consistently shown that “those who wrote out their notes by hand had a stronger conceptual understanding and were more successful in applying and integrating the material than those who used took notes with their laptops.” Why? Consider...

What drives this paradoxical finding? Mueller and Oppenheimer postulate that taking notes by hand requires different types of cognitive processing than taking notes on a laptop, and these different processes have consequences for learning. Writing by hand is slower and more cumbersome than typing, and students cannot possibly write down every word in a lecture. Instead, they listen, digest, and summarize so that they can succinctly capture the essence of the information. Thus, taking notes by hand forces the brain to engage in some heavy “mental lifting,” and these efforts foster comprehension and retention. By contrast, when typing students can easily produce a written record of the lecture without processing its meaning, as faster typing speeds allow students to

transcribe a lecture word for word without devoting much thought to the content. ([May, 2014](#); see also this WSJ article, "[Can handwriting make you smarter?](#)")

So, with optimal learning in mind, here is our technology policy:

With a few exceptions (see below), electronic devices, including laptops, cell phones, and tablets, are not permitted. This may seem harsh, but it's for the good of the learning environment. Studies have found that technology's benefits are often outweighed by the distractions they create (for you and people around you).

Exceptions to this policy include in-class activities that require devices to look things up—which may happen occasionally. But feel no obligation to bring a device to class for that reason; you'll always be OK without one.

If you have a question or concern about this policy, please let me know.

Recording

No audio or video recording or photography devices of any kind are permitted at any time.

Grade questions

Grade disputes must be submitted in writing with an explanation and evidence before scheduling a meeting during office hours. Requests to change grades must occur within 1 week of a grade being given. Note that the actual discussion of grades needs to take place in-person, by FERPA guidelines protecting student privacy. *Grade changes will be made only when there is evidence of an error in grading and/or recording of a grade.*

Extra credit

Extra credit *may* be offered in this course at the instructor's discretion but is in no way guaranteed.

Format for papers

For details on formatting your paper assignments, please see handouts on Canvas.

Academic misconduct

The University Student Conduct Code (available at conduct.uoregon.edu) defines academic misconduct. Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. By way of example, students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. Students should properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, it is the students' obligation to clarify the question with the instructor before committing or attempting to commit the act. Additional information about a common form of academic misconduct, plagiarism, is available at researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism.

Academic misconduct is a serious offense and will result in a grade of F. Such misconduct will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct.

Canvas for assignments

In-classes exercises, quizzes and some group work will occur on paper and circulated in class. Major assignments, however, will be turned in via Canvas, and the VeriCite function will be used to screen your papers for plagiarism. Emailed and printed work for such assignments is not accepted, except where noted.

Late and make-up work

Meeting deadlines is essential for success in this course and in your career ahead. All assignments must be turned in at the date and time specified on the course schedule. Late work receives a penalty of two letter grades per day.

Email

I check email twice per workday and rarely on weekends, and try to respond within 48 hours. Before emailing, please check to make sure the answer to your question is not on the syllabus or Canvas. Likewise, you are expected to check your UO email on a daily basis, as I will occasionally send important class updates and instructions via email.

Accessibility and disability accommodation

If you require any special assistance as a result of a documented disability, please see me at the start of term. The University of Oregon is working to create inclusive learning environments. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your participation, please notify me as soon as possible. You are also welcome to contact Disability Services in 164 Oregon Hall at (541) 346- 1155 or disabsrv@uoregon.edu. Please note that you are responsible for arranging all accommodations with the Accessible Education Center.

Classroom inclusiveness

The UO is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic and dating violence and gender-based stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences gender-based violence (intimate partner violence, attempted or completed sexual assault, harassment, coercion, stalking, etc.), know that you are not alone. UO has staff members trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more. Please be aware that all UO employees are required reporters. This means that if you tell me about a situation, I may have to report the information to my supervisor or the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity. Although I have to report the situation, you will still have options about how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. Our goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and have access to the resources you need. If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can call 541-346- SAFE, UO's 24-hour hotline, to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options. You can also visit the SAFE website at safe.uoregon.edu.

Additional Course Information

Accreditation Guidelines and Goals

The national accrediting agency for journalism education has required that all accredited journalism schools assess student mastery of 12 core values and competencies that every graduate of a journalism and mass communication program should possess. According to the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, all graduates, irrespective of their particular specialization, should be able to:

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society;
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
- Think critically, creatively and independently;
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
- Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

Writing Central

Looking for help with your writing? Trained undergraduate coaches at Writing Central, the SOJC's peer learning support program, are available every day of the week, either during drop-in hours or by appointment. The coffee and the conversations about writing are free. Writing coaches can help with everything from fleshing out story ideas to crafting stronger sentences to improving your grammar and AP style.

- Drop-in hours: (Allen 314, Weeks 2-10)
 - Mondays and Wednesdays: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
 - Tuesdays and Thursdays: 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.
- SOJC research librarian Carolina Hernandez will be available Wednesdays and Thursdays.
- To schedule an appointment: Visit journalism.uoregon.edu/sojc-writing-central