

COMM 850: Critical Disinformation Studies

Spring 2023 | Dey Hall - Rm 0302 | W: 5:05 PM-7:40 PM

Alice Marwick | Bynum 121 amarwick@unc.edu

Office hours by appointment (in person W-F or Zoom)



Anita Bryant, 1977

Protest against Drag Queen Story Hour, 2019

Description

In the aftermath of Trump's election and the UK's exit from the European Union, journalists, academics, and political elites espoused enormous concerns about "fake news," disinformation, and the "post-truth era." This, in turn, gave rise to a primarily philanthropy-funded apparatus of "Big Disinformation" research. Half a decade later, we are no closer to *solving* this thorny set of problems, but we are better *informed* about them—or are we? This class examines disinformation and related topics from a critical perspective that emphasizes history, power, and politics. Rather than seeing disinformation as something novel that emerged alongside social media and contemporary populist movements, we will contextualize it within a long history of propaganda, public relations, and media campaigns used to maintain dominant power relations. Focusing on disinformation as a primary way in which whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and empire have been established and reinforced, we will position today's media ecosystem on a timeline and discover what we can learn from the lessons of the past. Conceptualizing disinformation as a form of knowledge, we will examine how it is constructed, how it spreads, and why certain disinformation narratives are taken up so widely. Drawing from scholarship in communication, media studies, computational social science, science and technology studies, sociology, HCI, and related disciplines, the class provides a strong foundation in the sociotechnical approach to understanding disinformation.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Understand the primary academic contributions in the nascent field of disinformation studies, their strengths and weaknesses, and what gaps exist in the literature.
- Situate disinformation studies within communication and media studies traditions and theories, and draw on these approaches to better understand the present moment.
- Interpret and criticize dominant narratives around “fake news” and “disinformation.”
- Identify disinformative narratives in the past and present and link them to longer histories and media continuities.

Engagement and Expectations

- All readings will be available on Canvas.
- This is a graduate seminar. All students should come to class having thoroughly read the material and identified several points of discussion and/or questions.
- Class discussion is expected, but you are not expected to have all the answers. ALL questions are good questions! Please be open to others’ opinions, respectful of differences, and willing to share space with other members of the learning community. The students in this seminar come with different experiences and backgrounds, all valid.
- If you are sick, stay home! I can easily set up a Zoom for any class people wish/need to attend virtually.
- Masks are not required but you are welcome to wear a mask if you would like.
- Since this is a night class, it’s fine to eat/snack.

Readings

- All the readings except *Meme Wars* will be available on Canva. Unfortunately, *Meme Wars* is not available at the UNC library. [Meme Wars is \\$30 at Flyleaf](#), [\\$28 on Bookshop.org](#) and \$26 on Amazon and I recommend buying your own copy.

Assignments

- **Discussion Leadership.** Each of you will have ownership over a particular class as a discussion leader. You will be responsible for doing the readings ahead of time, formulating topics for conversation, and bringing in an artifact (news story, video, song, etc.) that relates to the topic of the week.
- **Response Papers (2).** You will each choose two weeks in which you will write a response paper (approx. 1000-1500 words) discussing the readings and making some sort of *argument* about them. At the end of each paper, include 2-4 questions to pose to the class. The paper will be due that day in class.
- **Final Paper.** The course will culminate with a 20–25-page paper that makes an original argument about an aspect of disinformation (or related topic). You will turn in your topic for the final paper on 2/8 after four weeks of class (1-2 pages). At that point, you will make an appointment with me (in person or Zoom) to discuss your paper idea. An annotated bibliography, fleshing out your argument and including a list of 7-10 sources,

will be due on 3/22 (5-6 pages). On the last day of class (4/26), you will give a 10-minute presentation about your paper. The final paper will be due at the end of exam period.

- **Collaborative Journal Article.** We will be working together to write a paper that uses the CDS approach to analyze a contemporary disinformation narrative, namely, the current right-wing narrative that LGBTQ+ communities attempt to “groom” children through drag shows. I find this narrative very interesting as it is directly linked to a long history of anti-LGBTQ+ activism (such as Anita Bryant’s 1970s Save Our Children campaign, the sexual psychopathy bills of the 1950s, and the current moral panic over trans kids and gender-affirming care) as well as a backlash to the gradual mainstreaming of drag over the last twenty years. I have been wanting to write about this for ages and this is a way for me to do this in collaboration.
 - I do note that this is not an easy topic to discuss and may be difficult for some of you – if this is the case, please let me know individually and privately and we will find tasks for you to do that are not directly connected to the topic of the paper but will still allow you to learn by doing.
 - To complete this assignment, we will spend a period of each class talking about our work on the paper and will divide up the tasks among the class members based on your interests and expertise. This will include a literature review, formulating research questions, determining our methodology, gathering data, analyzing data, and writing up the paper, which we will submit for publication for a journal (with all the class members as co-authors- I will be first author and then everyone else will be listed alphabetically).
 - I have never done this before with a class and it might go horribly, but I think the potential reward is worth it!
- Rubrics for all assignments will be posted on Canvas.

Grading Breakdown

Participation	20%
Discussion Leadership	10%
Response Papers	20%
Collaborative Paper Contributions	10%
Final Paper	
Final Paper Topic	
Annotated Bibliography	10%
Presentation	10%
Final Paper	20%
TOTAL:	100%

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Week / Date	
Week 1 – 1/11	Welcome and Introductions
Week 2 – 1/18	Defining The Problem
Week 3 – 1/25	Constructing Knowledge
Week 4 – 2/1	Disinformation and Narrative
Week 5 – 2/8	The Role of the Media
Week 6 – 2/15	The Role of Social Platforms
Week 7 – 2/22	Propaganda & Public Opinion I
Week 8 – 3/1	Propaganda & Public Opinion II
Week 9 – 3/8	Disinformation Around the Globe
<i>March 15 – Spring Break</i>	
Week 10 – 3/22	Differential Impact
Week 11 – 3/29	Far-Right Disinformation
Week 12 – 4/5 – <i>Zoom Class</i>	Disinformative Communities
Week 13 – 4/12	Influence Operations
Week 14 – 4/19	Conspiracy Theories
Week 15 – 4/26	Paper Presentations

Class Schedule and Readings

Week 1: January 11, 2023

- Welcome and introductions
- Syllabus
- Collaborative paper discussion

Week 2: January 18, 2023 - Defining the Problem

- Jack, C. (2017). *Lexicon Of Lies: Terms For Problematic Information*. Data & Society Research Institute.
- Marwick, A & Lewis, R. (2017). *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*. Data & Society Research Institute.
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2018). Fake news as a floating signifier: Hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood. *Javnost - The Public*, 25(3), 298–314.
- Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). Disinformation as political communication. *Political Communication*, 37(2), 145–156.

Week 3: January 25, 2023: Constructing Knowledge

- Mejia, R., Beckermann, K., & Sullivan, C. (2018). White lies: A racial history of the (post)truth. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 109–126.

- Almeida, S. (2015). Race-based epistemologies: The role of race and dominance in knowledge production. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*, 13, 79-105.
- Trouillot, M. (1995). "The Power in the Story" and "Good Day Columbus" in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.

Week 4: February 1, 2023: Disinformation and Narrative

- Polletta, F., & Callahan, J. (2017). Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: Storytelling in the Trump era. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 5(3), 392–408.
- Fenster, Mark (2008). Uncovering the Plot: Conspiracy Theory as Narrative. From *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Phillips, W., & Milner, R. (2021). Chapter 1: The devil's in the deep frames. In *You are here: A field guide for navigating polarized speech, conspiracy theories and our polluted information landscape*. MIT Press, 17-48.
- Hughes, S. (2017). American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000. *Journal of American Studies*, 51(3), 691-719.

Week 5: February 8, 2023: The Role of the Media

Draft Paper Topic Due

- Bishop, R. (2000). To protect and serve: The "guard dog" function of journalism in coverage of the Japanese-American Internment. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 2(2), 64–104.
- Kumar, Deepa (2004). "War Propaganda and the (Ab)uses of Women: Media constructions of the Jessica Lynch story." *Feminist Media Studies* 4(3): 297-313.
- Gilliam, F. D., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Wright, O. (1996). Crime in black and white: The violent, scary world of local news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(3), 6–23.
- Faris, R. M., Roberts, H., Etling, B., Bourassa, N., Zuckerman, E. & Benkler, Y. (2017). [Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election](#). Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research Paper.

Week 6: February 15, 2023: The Role of Social Platforms

Guest appearance by Rebecca Lewis, PhD Candidate in Communication at Stanford University, via Zoom

- Anderson, C.W. (2021). Fake News is Not a Virus: On Platforms and Their Effects. *Communication Theory* 31(1): 42–61. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa008>
- Lewis, R. (2018). *Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube*. Data & Society Research Institute, September 18.

- Tripodi, Francesca. (2022). “Understand How Information Flows” and “Set the Traps” from *The Propagandist’s Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Week 7: February 22, 2023: Propaganda Studies and Public Opinion, Part 1

- Bernays (1928). Manipulating Public Opinion: The Why and the How. *American Journal of Sociology* 33(6): 958-971.
- Excerpts from The Institute of Propaganda Analysis (1939). *The Fine Art Of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin's Speeches*, Alfred McClung Lee & Elizabeth Briant Lee, Eds. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- For context: Schiffrin, Anya (2018). Fighting Disinformation with Media Literacy: In 1939. *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 10.
<https://www.cjr.org/innovations/institute-propaganda-analysis.php>
- Staal, Jonas (2019). “Propaganda and Democracy: A Short History.” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 17-48.

Week 8: March 1, 2023: Propaganda Studies and Public Opinion, Part 2

- Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky. (1988). “Chapter 1: A Propaganda Model.” from *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. 3rd ed., The Bodley Head. (pp. 61-96 in Canvas version)
- Kenner, R. (2015). *Merchants of Doubt*. New York, NY: Sony Pictures Classics (documentary): free on Hulu with subscription, rent on Amazon for 3.99, or [stream free from UNC libraries](#).
- Weddig, C. (2022). Climate Change Denial and Skepticism: A review of the Literature. *Social Science Research Council: MediaWell*. September 15.
<https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/climate-change-denial-skepticism-a-review-of-the-literature/versions/1-0/>

Week 9: March 8, 2023: Disinformation in the Global South

- Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., & Moyo, D. (2019). “Fake news” and cyber-propaganda in sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the research agenda. *African Journalism Studies* 40(4), 1-12.
- Pype and, K. and Maluta Makaya, S. (2022). Noise in Kinshasa. In *Disinformation in the Global South* (eds H. Wasserman and D. Madrid-Morales). <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1002/9781119714491.ch5>
- Bachmann, I., Grassau, D. and Labarca, C. (2022). Aliens, Spies, and Staged Vandalism. In *Disinformation in the Global South* (eds H. Wasserman and D. Madrid-Morales). <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1002/9781119714491.ch6>
- Ong, Jonathan Corpus and Cabbuag, Samuel. (2022). “Pseudonymous Influencers and Horny 'Alts' in the Philippines: Media Manipulation Beyond ‘Fake News’”. *The Journal of Socio-Technical Critique*. 132. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/132

- Chandra, P., & Pal, J. (2019). Rumors and collective sensemaking: Managing ambiguity in an informal marketplace. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conf on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–12.

March 15, 2023 – no class, Spring Break

Week 10: March 22, 2023: Differential Impacts

Annotated Bibliography Due

- Duru, N. J. (2004). The Central Park Five, The Scottsboro Boys, and the myth of the bestial black man. *Cardozo Law Review*, 25(4), 1315-1365.
- Collins-Dexter, Brandi. (2020). *Canaries in the Coal Mine: COVID-19 Misinformation and Black Communities*. Technology and Social Change Project, Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Publics, and Public Policy.
- Asian American Disinformation Table (2022) [Power, Platforms, Politics: Asian Americans and Disinformation Landscape Report](#).

Week 11: March 29, 2023: Far-Right Disinformation

Guest appearances by Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg, Technology & Social Change Project, Shorenstein Center on Media, Publics, and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School via Zoom

- Donovan, Joan, Dreyfuss, Emily, and Friedberg, Brian. (2022). *Meme Wars*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Week 12: April 5, 2023: Disinformative Communities

Class will be held over Zoom

- Sijia Xiao, Coye Cheshire, and Amy Bruckman. 2021. Sensemaking and the Chemtrail Conspiracy on the Internet: Insights from Believers and Ex-believers. *Proceedings of the ACM Human Computer Interaction* 5, CSCW2, Article 454 (October 2021), 28 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479598>
- Olshansky, A., Peaslee, R. M., & Landrum, A. R. (2020). Flat-Smacked! Converting to Flat Eartherism. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 19(2), 46–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2020.1774257>
- Moran, R. E., Grasso, I., & Koltai, K. (2022). Folk Theories of Avoiding Content Moderation: How Vaccine-Opposed Influencers Amplify Vaccine Opposition on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4).
- Lee, C., Yang, T., Inchoco, G., Jones, G., and Satyanarayan, A. (2021). Viral Visualizations: How Coronavirus Skeptics Use Orthodox Data Practices to Promote Unorthodox Science Online. *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21)*, May 8-13, 2021, Yokohama, Japan. ACM, New York, NY, 18 pages.

Week 13: April 12, 2023: Influence Operations

Guest Lecture: Yiping Xia, Postdoctoral Researcher, Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life

- Freelon, D., Bossetta, M., Wells, C., Lukito, J., Xia, Y., & Adams, K. (2022). Black Trolls Matter: Racial and Ideological Asymmetries in Social Media Disinformation. *Social Science Computer Review* 40(3): 560-578 (originally published in 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439320914853>
- Yiping Xia, Josephine Lukito, Yini Zhang, Chris Wells, Sang Jung Kim & Chau Tong (2019): Disinformation, performed: self-presentation of a Russian IRA account on Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1621921
- King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. (2017). How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument. *American Political Science Review*, 111(3), 484-501.
- Harold, Scott W., Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html. **Please note this is a report commissioned by the US Military. Read critically! Focus on Chapters 1-3.**

Week 14: April 19, 2023 – Conspiracy Theories

- Fenster, Mark (2008). Introduction, Chapter 3: Finding the Plot: Conspiracy Theory as Interpretation, and Chapter 5: Conspiracy, Community, and Play. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Casey Ryan Kelly (2022). “COVID-19 conspiracy rhetoric and other primal fantasies.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2022.2142654>
- Marwick, A. and Partin, W. (2022). Constructing alternative facts: Populist expertise and the QAnon conspiracy. *New Media & Society*: 1-21

Week 15: April 26, 2023 – Last day of class – Paper Presentations