

MHS 3890/6500: Special Topics in the Social Foundations of Health - Misinformation and Polarization

Spring 2022

Time: Tuesday/Thursday, 1:15-2:30 PM

Location:

Instructor: Matthew Facciani

Office Hours:

Office:

Email:

Required Texts

No textbook is required for this course. All required readings are article PDFs that will be uploaded on the course website.

Course Overview

Course Description

In this course we will learn about the causes of misinformation and techniques to reduce its spread. There will be a particular focus on health misinformation including information about COVID-19 and vaccinations. We will start by learning how psychological biases and identities impact our information processing. Then we will evaluate how our interpersonal connections can influence our beliefs as well as strategies to facilitate productive dialogue. After that, we will cover how social media consumption contributes to misinformation and political polarization. In addition to covering scientific articles, we will regularly practice different techniques we can use to combat misinformation outside the classroom.

Course Objectives:

- Understand how identities, networks, and cognitive biases influence polarization and misinformation
- Critically evaluate whether information is true or not
- Learn how to have productive discussions with other people who you disagree with
- Understand the relationship between social media, the internet, and misinformation
- Learn skills to combat misinformation in your daily life

Course Assignments & Grades

Attendance/Participation (25 points)

You are expected to attend and participate in every class meeting, and arrive on time. Attendance is especially important to this class since it focuses on discussion, in-class exercises, and is an abbreviated course. Sometimes unavoidable conflicts occasionally arise; therefore you may miss two classes for any reason without penalty provided you send me a notification/acknowledgement of your absence. Please let me know if you need attendance-related accommodations due to religious holidays or extended illness.

Group Discussion (25 points)

In addition to participation, each student will help lead the group discussion on the day's readings. You will be randomly assigned into a group (of about 5 students) to lead one of the three group discussion days. The goal here is to describe the article(s) to the class: what were the main questions, what methods did they use (if applicable), and what did they find? Students should also prepare questions to generate class discussion, questions they had about the article, and commentary on how this can help combat misinformation in daily life. I will help facilitate the discussion, but the purpose of this assignment is for the students to lead our class. We can learn a lot by teaching!

Written Reflections (25 points)

You will keep a journal to record notes and reflections about the course readings, class discussions, and exercises. This is meant to help you document the main takeaways from the course so you can apply them beyond this class. These are informal and can describe anything you wanted to share. Examples include something in the reading that surprised you or was particularly impactful, what you learned from the class exercise, or any general comments you had about the discussion. Reflections are due Sunday night (11:59pm) via Brightspace and are only 1-2 pages max (double spaced).

Final Presentation & Final Reflection (25 points)

At the end of the course, you will describe a misinformation encounter in your final written reflection paper. This can be quite broad, and you are encouraged to start thinking about potential topics at the start of the course. Examples include seeing misinformation on social media, television, or during a conversation. You will describe what happened, who shared it (if it is someone you know and not an organization, please keep them anonymous and simply say "a friend"), why it is misinformation, and what could be done to combat it (on either the micro, meso, or macro level). The goal is to apply what you learned in the class to combat misinformation outside of class. In addition to the written reflection, all students will briefly describe their experiences (3 minutes max) during the final day of class.

Grading scale (out of 100 total points)

A:	93.00+	B+:	87.00-89.99	C+:	77.00-79.99	D:	65.00-69.99
A-:	90.00-92.99	B:	83.00-86.99	C:	73.00-76.99	F:	64.99 and below
		B-:	80.00-82.99	C-:	70.00-72.99		

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism:

All students are bound by Vanderbilt's Honor Code as outlined in the Student Handbook (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system#honorcode).

Under this code, all of the written work you submit for this course is expected to be your own. Plagiarism, cheating, submission of work produced for another course, and the use of text produced by someone else will not be tolerated. Flagrant violations of this policy will result in an immediate failing grade for the assignment and will result in the student being reported to the Honor Council. Honor Council investigations may lead to a failure for the course or academic suspensions. If you're not sure, cite it!

Accommodation and Access. If you need course accommodations due to a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please contact both me and the Office of Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services (322-4705) as soon as possible. To request accommodations from the Disability Services Program, see Vanderbilt's Reasonable Accommodations Request Process: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ead/ds_students.html or call the number above.

Course Norms & Expectations

Sociological discussions often stir up deep emotions. While it is important to acknowledge differing feelings and thoughts, this class is to be a "judgment-free zone" at all times. This means that even if you disagree with somebody's opinion about a subject, you do not have the right to sling any sort of insult, raise your voice, or criticize. I do encourage disagreement, and discussions are often livelier if people have dissenting views about a subject. However, civil/polite disagreement and hostility are two different things. I will not tolerate hostility in the classroom and will ask anyone participating in this behavior to leave for the remainder of the class period. This course will be taught from a scientific lens and our goals are to critically evaluate information and our beliefs.

Course Schedule & Readings

Date	Topic	Readings (<i>Read before class</i>) and Exercises	Assignments Due
Section A: Misinformation, Polarization, & Identities			
Week 1			
Tuesday 1/25 Class #1 (In-Person/Zoom)	Introduction, Syllabus, and Defining Misinformation Terms	Readings: Jack, C. (2017). Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information. <i>Data & Society</i> , 3(22), 1094-1096. Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ... & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. <i>Science</i> , 359(6380), 1094-1096.	
Thursday 1/27 Class #2 (In-Person/Zoom)	How do we critically evaluate information?	Readings: 5 quick ways we can all double-check coronavirus information online (firstdraftnews.org) New research shows successes in teaching 'lateral reading' techniques Center for an Informed Public (uw.edu) Science Article Evaluation Exercises: Fake vs Real Headlines: factitious (augamestudio.com) Lateral Reading Interactive Media Bias Chart Public - Ad Fontes Media Tools - How do you know a paper is legit?	Written Reflection

Week 2			
Tuesday 2/1 Class #3 (In-person/Zoom)	Group Discussion Identities, polarization, and misinformation	Readings: Van Bavel, J. J., & Pereira, A. (2018). The partisan brain: An identity-based model of political belief. <i>Trends in cognitive sciences</i> , 22(3), 213-224. Peterson, E., & Iyengar, S. (2021). Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?. <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> , 65(1), 133-147.	
Thursday 2/3 Class #4 (In-person/Zoom)	Using Social Science to Combat COVID-19 Misinformation. Practicing Prebunking Exercises	Readings: Van Bavel, J. J., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., ... & Willer, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. <i>Nature human behaviour</i> , 4(5), 460-471. Exercises: Bad News Prebunking Game/GO VIRAL	Written Reflection

Section B: Social Networks and Interpersonal Connections			
Week 3			
Tuesday 2/8 Class #5 (In-person/Zoom)	Group Discussion Polarization, and message framing	Readings: Keating, J., Van Boven, L., & Judd, C. M. (2016). Partisan underestimation of the polarizing influence of group discussion. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 65, 52-58. Young, D. G., & Bleakley, A. (2020). Ideological health spirals: An integrated political and health communication approach to COVID interventions. <i>International Journal of Communication</i> , 14, 17.	

<p>Thursday 2/10 Class #6 (In-person/Zoom)</p>	<p>Productive Conversations & Empathy Exercises</p>	<p>Readings: Dr. Kimberly Manning: Yes, we can reach the unvaccinated (ajc.com)</p> <p>Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2016). Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing. <i>Science</i>, 352(6282), 220-224.</p> <p>Exercises: Five steps for having productive conversations</p> <p>Motivational interviewing</p>	<p>Written Reflection</p>
<p>Week 4</p>			
<p>Tuesday 2/15 Class #7 (In-person/Zoom)</p>	<p>Logical Fallacies and Epistemology</p>	<p>Readings: A history of FLICC: the 5 techniques of science denial - Cranky Uncle</p> <p>Exercises: Street Epistemology Survey</p> <p>Street Epistemology Tip Sheet Speaking with the Vaccine-Hesitant</p>	
<p>Section C: Social Media and Macro Level Forces</p>			

<p>Thursday 2/17 Class #8 (In-person/Zoom)</p>	<p>Group Discussion Social Media and Misinformation</p>	<p><i>Readings:</i> Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. F., ... & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. <i>Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences</i>, 115(37), 9216-9221.</p> <p>Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. <i>Science</i>, 359(6380), 1146-1151.</p>	<p>Written Reflection</p>
Week 5			
<p>Tuesday 2/22 Class #9 (In-person/Zoom)</p>	<p>Analyzing our social media use</p>	<p><i>Readings:</i> How 'engagement' makes you vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation on social media (theconversation.com)</p> <p>Facebook uncovers Chinese network behind fake expert - BBC News</p> <p><i>Exercises:</i> Welcome to the Spot the Troll Disinformation Quiz</p> <p>Algorithmic Literacy Teaching Activity (louisville.edu)</p> <p>Detect DeepFakes: How to counteract misinformation created by AI — MIT Media Lab</p>	
<p>Thursday 2/24 Class #10 (In-person/Zoom)</p>	<p>Student Presentations</p>	<p>Group Presentations</p>	<p>Presentation Final Written Reflection</p>

Please note that this syllabus and course schedule is subject to change based on circumstances arising throughout the course of the semester. The most up-to-date information will be posted on the course website.