

Political Science 334:

Seeking Truth in an Age of Cynicism and Political Polarization

University of Washington
Autumn 2018

Professor Mark Alan Smith

Office: Gowen 29; Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:15-3:15 and by appointment

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Overview of Class:

In 2016 the Word of the Year for Oxford Dictionaries was “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The forces leading to this phenomenon have been building in the U.S. and around the world over the last few decades. An academic movement often called “postmodernism” has asserted that there are no overarching truths, just local truths relative to each person or community. Meanwhile, the public has lost confidence in the institutions that used to serve as arbiters of truth, including the media, business, government, and organized religion. The result is a profound challenge: How do we know what’s true? The answer for many people today is whatever feels true from within the filter bubble of their social media and personal networks.

This course will focus on the difficulties of separating fact from fiction in the contemporary world. We will learn basic tools of critical and scientific thinking and then apply them to politics and other areas of controversy. We will gain insights into the political and cognitive biases that guide how people interpret information, form beliefs, and resist changing their minds. In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. By understanding the errors in intuition, perception, and memory that can lead people astray and create a tribal mentality, students will strengthen their ability to recognize their own biases and evaluate claims through reason and evidence. Along the way, we will investigate why so many Americans either reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus or accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also investigate the appeal of conspiracy theories and their ability to form and spread virtually overnight.

Required Readings:

Lewis Vaughn, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, 5th edition; and a set of articles and audio and video recordings available online and linked through the course’s Canvas site

Course Requirements:

The grading is based on two in-class exams, a paper due during finals weeks, and class participation. The exams will cover the lectures plus the assigned readings and audio and video

recordings. Note that there is no traditional final exam. The second exam will cover only material from the second half of the class.

Grading:

First exam: 25%

Second exam: 25%

Class participation: 15%

Paper assignment: 35%. You will submit your paper through Turnitin, a program that organizes online submissions and assists in detecting plagiarism.

Schedule of Topics

Wednesday, September 26 Introduction to the class

Readings/preparation:

Stephen Colbert, The Word—Truthiness

The Economist, Art of the Lie

Kathryn Schulz, On Being Wrong

Van Jones, Safe Spaces on College Campuses

Robert George and Cornel West, Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression

Katie Herzog, Twitter, Trans Kids, Call-Out Culture, and a \$10,000 Blunt

Monday, October 1 Premodern approaches to truth

Readings/preparation:

Augustine of Hippo, letter 93 to Vincentius (portions)

Thomas Aquinas, The Sin of Blasphemy

Martin Luther, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants

Pope Pius IX, Syllabus of Errors

Wikipedia entry on film version of Fiddler on the Roof

Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, Tradition

Wednesday, October 3 Modern approaches to truth, part 1

Readings/preparation:

Steven Pinker, Reason Is Not Negotiable

Steven Pinker, Enlightenment Now

Bret Stephens, The Dying Art of Disagreement

Skeptic Presents, What Is a Skeptic?

Claire Lehmann, Free Thought, Outrage, and the Alt Right

Monday, October 8 Modern approaches to truth, part 2. Guest lecture from Cornell Clayton,

Thomas R. Foley Distinguished Professor of Government, Washington State University

Readings/preparation:

Lewis Vaughn, The Power of Critical Thinking, chapter 1
John Stuart Mill, All Minus One, from On Liberty

Wednesday, October 10 Postmodern approaches to truth

Readings/preparation:

Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author
Albert Mohler, Postmodernism and Society
Lee McIntyre, Post-Truth
Reza Aslan, interview on The Daily Show
Jesse Singal, Reza Aslan on What the New Atheists Get Wrong about Islam
Lin-Manuel Miranda, lyrics of Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story

Monday, October 15 Discovering truths through science

Readings/preparation:

Lewis Vaughn, The Power of Critical Thinking, chapters 9 and 10
Lindsay Beyerstein, On Bullshit: Harry Frankfurt, Donald Trump, and Indifference to Truth

Wednesday, October 17 Premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to morality

Readings/preparation:

Mark Alan Smith, Discovering Morality through Inclusive Deliberation

Monday, October 22 Origins and effects of political polarization

Readings/preparation:

Scott Alexander, I Can Tolerate Anything Except the Outgroup
Lilliana Mason, Uncivil Agreement
Zeynep Tufekci, Why Online Politics Get So Extreme So Fast

Wednesday, October 24 Tribalism and truth

Readings/preparation:

Tom Jacobs, Why We Engage in Tribalism, Nationalism, and Scapegoating
Jonathan Haidt, When and Why Nationalism Beats Globalism
Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, The Threat of Tribalism
Amy Chua, Political Tribes
Andrew Sullivan, Can Our Democracy Survive Tribalism?

Monday, October 29 First exam

Wednesday, October 31 Traditional media, alternative media, social media, and truth

Readings/preparation:

Craig Silverman, Viral Fake News Election Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook
Danah Boyd, Did Media Literacy Backfire?
VICE on HBO, How Truth Lost Its Meaning in Trump's America
Caitlin Flanagan, Why the Left Is So Afraid of Jordan Peterson

Meghan Daum, Nuance: A Love Story
Wikipedia entry on Alex Jones
Robert Wright and David Kaye, Free Expression Online and around the World

Monday, November 5 Universities and truth

Readings/preparation:

Jacalyn Kelly, Tara Sadeghieh, and Khosrow Adeli, Peer Review in Scientific Publications
Musa al-Gharbi, A Lack of Ideological Diversity is Killing Social Research
Nicholas Kristof, A Confession of Liberal Intolerance
Debra Soh, Why Transgender Kids Should Wait to Transition
Debra Soh, Sex Research, Asian Discrimination, and #MeToo
April Kelly-Woessner, On Whether Millennials are Tolerant
Jeff Jones and David Askenaszi, Free Expression on U.S. Universities

Wednesday, November 7 Why facts alone rarely persuade. Guest lecture from Brendan Nyhan, Professor of Public Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

Readings/preparation:

Maria Konnikova, I Don't Want to be Right
Kristin Wong, Why It's So Hard To Admit You're Wrong
Julia Galef, Why You Think You're Right—Even If You're Wrong
Jerry Taylor, A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides
Rachel Cohen, The Libertarian Who Accidentally Helped Make the Case for Regulation

Monday, November 12 No class (Veterans' Day)

Wednesday, November 14 Fallacies and biases that undermine reasoning

Readings/preparation:

Lewis Vaughn, The Power of Critical Thinking, chapters 2 and 5

Monday, November 19 Flaws in intuition

Readings/preparation:

Andrew Shtulman, Scienceblind
Lisa Belkin, The Odds of That
Mark Greer, When Intuition Misfires
Annie Duke, Thinking in Bets
Ed Yong, To Predict What Will Make You Happy, Ask a Stranger Rather than Guessing Yourself

Wednesday, November 21 No class (Thanksgiving break)

Monday, November 26 Flaws in perception and memory

Readings/preparation:

Robert Kurzban, Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite
Ann Marsh and Greta Lorge, How the Truth Gets Twisted
Steven Novella, Body Snatchers, Phantom Limbs, and Alien Hands
Daniel Simons, Seeing the World As It Isn't
Stephen Dubner, Why Is My Life So Hard?

Wednesday, November 28 Experts and expertise

Readings/preparation:

Lewis Vaughn, The Power of Critical Thinking, chapter 4
Steven Novella, Scientific Consensus
Massimo Pigliucci, Who's Your Expert?
Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise

Monday, December 3 Conspiracy theories

Readings/preparation:

Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky, Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception
William Saletan, Conspiracy Theorists Aren't Really Skeptics
Wikipedia entry on 9/11 conspiracy theories

Wednesday, December 5 Second exam

Wednesday, December 12 Paper due