

# IP121-30 Truth and Misinformation

**23/24**

**Department**

Liberal Arts

**Level**

Undergraduate Level 1

**Module leader**

Bryan Brazeau

**Credit value**

30

**Module duration**

22 weeks

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

This is a core first-year module on the BA in Liberal Arts course. The module engages students with key theories and contemporary questions around the issues of truth and misinformation from multiple perspectives, including within a variety of disciplines and contexts.

Topics covered may include concepts of scientific objectivity and universality; socially-constructed models of truth; the individual, social, and political consequences of various models of truth; the communication of risk and risk perception, political and social constructions of misinformation, the key role played by news media in society in spreading both information and disinformation, propaganda, conspiracy theories, fake news, memes, social media, and the changing role of expertise in a fragmented public sphere.

[Module web page](#)

### Module aims

This module aims to develop your critical thinking skills; your ability to assimilate, apply, and critique complex theoretical frameworks; and your skills of expressing an original evidence-based argument that is the fruit of an interdisciplinary research process.

You will benefit from taking this module as it will provide you with theoretical tools and content knowledge that you can apply to future interdisciplinary study in Liberal Arts and in modules

across the university.

The module's content will introduce you to a set of topical issues around truth and misinformation today, expose you to practical considerations and consequences of certain positions, while also inviting critical and creative responses.

This module will not provide you with a definition or a ready-made model of truth or misinformation, but rather will give you the tools to reflect and define your own approach to these concepts.

Through weekly groupwork and problem-based learning sessions, we will work together to explore complex questions such as:

- Is there one central truth or multiple conflicting versions of truth?
- What is unique about the threat posed by misinformation in our current historical moment?
- Can we trust our experience to convey truth to us?
- How can we verify and critically examine sources? What sources of information are trustworthy and how do we know?
- Is truth only what we can perceive and measure with our senses/instruments?
- What constitutes "facts" in our digital age?
- Are there particular disciplines that have privileged access to truth?
- What ethical responsibilities do we have as citizens in our consumption and sharing of information online? What tools can we use to conduct our own fact-checking?
- Is truth socially constructed and dependent on context or is truth universal?
- What is the role of expertise in modern mass democracies?
- How do institutional interests shape our ideas of truth?
- What are the theoretical roots of political and social debates around truth?
- What are the psychological, social, and political effects of media saturation?
- How do different academic disciplines define truth and why do they disagree with each other?
- What legal responsibilities should information platforms (across a variety of media) have?
- How can we study the role and importance of ignorance and motivated rejection of expertise as a social force?
- What are the challenges when creating policy to regulate the spread of misinformation?
- What can we learn from the rise of popular conspiracy theories and social movements based on misinformation? What do these movements tell us about our information ecology, our society's concerns, and emerging security threats for the future?
- How do the financial structures and business models of information platforms increase or limit

the spread of misinformation?

—Are there limits to freedom of speech?

## Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The syllabus for this module is flexible as it will depend on the expertise of the module convenor and student interests. The module will always be interdisciplinary in nature, but will feature a wide variety of case studies around the broad nexus of truth as a critical issue.

Because this topic is dynamic and characterised by ongoing debate, the syllabus may change from year to year to reflect active debates and contemporary challenges. An indicative syllabus may include case studies such as:

Introduction: Facts and Beliefs

I. Do you believe in reality? — Facts, Beliefs, and Scientific Truth

- a) "You Can't Handle The Truth": Truth Within and Beyond the Cave
- b) Evil Demons, Certainty, and Things in Themselves
- c) "Eppur si muove!"—Scientific Revolutions and Shifting Paradigms
- d) Disciplinarity and Scientific Education from 1950 to Present Day

II. Building Truth — Reality as a Collective Enterprise

- a) The Truth of the System: Economic Materialism
- b) Fight the Power I: Legitimising Social Inequality
- c) Fight the Power II: Biology and the Patriarchy

III. Truth from 1990-Present day: The One and the Many

- a) The Science Wars I: Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism
- b) The Science Wars II: Academic Hoaxes and Their Political Consequences

IV. Liberal Education as a Tradition of Combatting Falsehoods: From the Donation of Constantine to Wikileaks

- a) The "Fog of War:" Misinformation and Propaganda during Conflict(s)
- b) Pepe the Frog: Memes in a Society of Spreadable Spectacle
- c) Fake News and Real Threats: Pizzagate

V. The Fragmentation of the Public Sphere in the Digital Age

- a) Risk Transmission and Public Outrage: Vaccinations from MMR to COVID-19
- b) The Role of Expertise on Social Media
- c) Recommended Misinformation: Algorithms from Instagram to TikTok
- d) Rethinking "Common Sense:" Social Representations and Group Identity

VI. Information Ecologies in the Digital Age

- a) Peer Review, Web 2.0, and Decentralised Systems of Knowledge
- b) Exposing Misinformation: Investigative Journalism in the Digital Age
- c) Scientific Misinformation and Existential Threats: Climate Change and News Media Reporting
- d) Fictional Ecologies: Science Fiction and Disaster

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Articulate their own understanding of "truth" and "misinformation" along with related critical issues.
- Critically examine case studies related to the issue of truth and misinformation from interdisciplinary perspectives
- Demonstrate an improvement in their ability to express and structure an evidence-based argument
- Explain the complex relationship between academic disciplines such as science and critical theory
- Express their own perspective of how truth is constructed and the contexts of its production
- Critically analyse misinformation, emerging media, and media literacy across cultures, disciplines, and time periods
- Apply compassion and curiosity to gain a greater understanding of misinformation campaigns and their popularity among certain groups
- Demonstrate an understanding of the threat that misinformation poses within the contemporary information ecology

## Indicative reading list

As the case studies will change from year to year, this list is indicative only:

- Alberti, S. J. M. M. (2005) 'Objects and the Museum', *Isis*, 96(4), pp. 559-571. doi: 10.1086/498593.
- Bauer, S. W. (2015) *The story of science: from the writings of Aristotle to the big bang theory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Binns, Peter (1973) "The Marxist Theory of Truth." *Radical Philosophy* 4, pp.3-9.
- Brake, M. and Weitkamp, E. (2010) *Introducing science communication: a practical guide*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Camporeale, Salvatore I. (1996) "Lorenzo Valla's Oratio on the Pseudo-Donation of Constantine: Dissent and Innovation in Early Renaissance Humanism." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.1: 9-26.
- Centre for Countering Digital Hate (2021) *Malgorithm: How Instagram's Algorithm Publishes Misinformation and Hate to Millions During a Pandemic*. <https://www.counterhate.com/malgorithm>
- Ceron, A. (2015) Internet, News, and Political Trust: The Difference Between Social Media and Online Media Outlets. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20, 487–503.
- Cheyfitz, E. (2017) *The Disinformation Age: The Collapse of Liberal Democracy in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2009) *The second sex*. Trans. C. de, Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier, London: Jonathan Cape.
- Debord, G. (2002), trans. Ken Knabb, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Hobgoblin Press: Canberra.
- DeSalle, R. and Tattersall, I. (2018) *Troublesome science: the misuse of genetics and genomics in understanding race*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Gillespie, T. (2018) *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Graham, G. (2013) "Public opinion and the public sphere." In: Emden, C.J. and Midgley, D. eds. *Beyond Habermas: democracy, knowledge, and the public sphere*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books: 29-41.
- Gregory, J. and Miller, S. (2000) *Science in public: communication, culture, and credibility*. Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Pub.
- Habermas, J. (1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Translated by Thomas Burger. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Henry, J. (2012) *A short history of scientific thought*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Koertge, N., ed. (1998) *A house built on sand: exposing postmodernist myths about science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kuhn, T. (1963) "The Function of Dogma in Scientific Research," in A. Crombie, ed., *Scientific change: historical studies in the intellectual, social and technical conditions for scientific discovery and technical invention, from antiquity to the present*. London: Heineman.
- Latour, B. (1999) *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Nelkin, D. (1996) 'The Science Wars: Responses to a Marriage Failed', *Social Text*, (46/47). doi: 10.2307/466846.
- Lewandowsky, S., and Klaus Oberauer, (2016) "Motivated Rejection of Science," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25(4): 217-222.
- ———, Ullrich K.H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, et al., (2012) "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13 no.3: 106-131.
- Markham, T. (2017) *Media and everyday life*. London: Macmillan Education. Nelkin, D. (1996) 'The Science Wars: Responses to a Marriage Failed', *Social Text*, (46/47). doi: 10.2307/466846.
- Markova, I. (1996) "Towards an Epistemology of Social Representations." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 26(2), 177-196.
- Mejia, R., Kay Beckermann, and Curtis Sullivan, eds. "White Lies: a Racial History of the (Post)Truth." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15: 2, 109-126.
- Mihailidis, P., and Viotty, S. (2017) *Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in "Post-Fact" Society*. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(4), 441– 454.
- Moscovici, S. (1992). *The psychology of scientific myths*. In M. von Cranach, W. Doise & G. Mugny (Eds.), *Social representations and the social bases of knowledge*. Lewiston, NY: Hogrefe & Huber.
- O'Connor, C. and James Owen Weatherall (2020) *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2018) *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. London: Allen Lane.
- Snow, C. P. (1959) *The two cultures and the scientific revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sokal, A., (1996) "A Physicist Experiments With Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca* 4. ---, (1996) 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text*, (46/47). doi: 10.2307/466856. ---, (2000) *The Sokal hoax: the sham*

that shook the academy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Sur, Abha. (2008) 'Persistent Patriarchy: Theories of Race and Gender in Science' *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp. 7-8.
- Tufekci, Z. (2018) *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Vasterman, P., ed. (2018) *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Verhulsdonck, G. and Marohang Limbu, eds., (2013) *Digital Rhetoric and Global Literacies: Communication Modes and Digital Practices in the Networked World*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Wagner, W., Gerard Duveen, Sandra Jovchelovitch, et al. (1999) "Theory and Method of Social Representations," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2 (1999): 95–125.
- Wu, T. (2017) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. New York: Knopf Publishing.
- Yearley, Steven. (2005) *Making sense of science*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Zimdars, M. and Kembrew McLeod (2020) *Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press.

Due to the dynamic nature of the module, readings will change each year, based on active debates and challenges. The course will also make extensive use of academic articles, book chapters, journalistic articles, and other forms of written media as required by the individual topics.

### **Research element**

Students will conduct independent secondary (and possibly primary) research both for their assessments and for weekly group tasks.

### **Interdisciplinary**

All modules in Liberal Arts are interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary by definition. This module is no exception. It features theories and ideas from a wide range of disciplines.

### **International**

The module will employ case studies from around the world. As students will have input into which case studies they would like to explore, the module will embody the best principles of representative curriculum design. Moreover, depending on the students and module convenor, multilingual approaches to the case studies, to groupwork, and to research elements will be strongly encouraged.

### **Subject specific skills**

As a first-year core module, students who take this module will gain skills such as critical thinking, writing skills such as argument structure, learn to navigate interdisciplinary approaches, hone their reading skills (with regard to complex theory), gain independent research skills, etc...

These skills will be foundational for their future modules in Liberal Arts which will build on them.

## Transferable skills

All skills gained in a Liberal Arts module are transferrable by definition.

Like all Liberal Arts modules, students on this module will learn time management, project management (by working in weekly groups), critical thinking, and gain greater confidence in their own ability to express and structure evidence-based arguments.

In terms of personal development, this module will encourage students to think critically about their own preconceptions and to consider both truth and misinformation from a complex and multifaceted perspective.

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## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	20 sessions of 15 minutes (2%)
Seminars	22 sessions of 2 hours (15%)
Private study	66 hours (22%)
Assessment	185 hours (62%)
Total	300 hours

### Private study description

Approximately three hours per week (on average) will be dedicated to readings, tasks between seminars, groupwork, and preparation.

## Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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## Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

### Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time
Pop Quizzes	15%	20 hours

Eight pop quizzes will take place randomly throughout the year. Each one will involve five

## Weighting

## Study time

multiple-choice questions that will build on readings and in-class discussions. The final mark for this assessment will be the mean mark of the top seven pop quizzes throughout the year (lowest mark will be dropped).

### Group Reflection / Debate

15%

25 hours

This assessment requires students to submit a summary narrative of their group reflections and conversations on the difficulty of agreeing on a definition of truth. They may equally choose to represent disagreements in their group as a debate or dialogue.

The piece will require reflection on their intellectual journey thus far (both personally and as a group) regarding their approach to the issue of truth and reference to at least two critical frameworks explored in the module.

Students may choose to submit in a written (dialogic/narrative essay) or audio (podcast) format (10 minutes), but in either case, the level of critical engagement with theoretical frameworks should be the same.

### Case Study Literature Review

15%

40 hours

Students will be required to conduct research on a case study of their choice (either from the module or based on their own interests) with regard to the question of truth or misinformation from an interdisciplinary perspective. They will be expected to conduct in-depth research on this topic and to summarize the key works in a very specific field, pointing out the gaps within and between disciplinary approaches. In either case, this assessment will require deep and focussed critical engagement with a problem, a detailed case study, and/or theoretical frameworks emerging from the readings.

For this assessment, students will have the option of submitting either a 1000-word essay or a 10-minute podcast (audio essay). In both cases, submissions will be marked as an academic essay according to the 20-point marking scale in terms of structure, use of sources, critical engagement, referencing, etc... but the podcast will allow for an alternative form of knowledge-production that focusses on audio production values rather than writing skills. Students will be free to choose which skills they wish to develop in this assessment.

### Media Production (Investigative or Creative)

25%

40 hours

This assessment involves a group project where the students collaborate to create a 30 minute video that will either be: a) An "investigative deep dive" on one focussed misinformation case study (from any culture or time period). Students selecting this option will use the final third of the video to analyse the choices they made in their investigative exposé, demonstrating links to other case studies and theoretical frameworks seen in class. or b) A creative disinformation documentary that attempts to convince the viewer of a particular disinformation campaign. Students selecting this option will use the final third of the video to analyse the choices they made in creating the video and their links to other case studies and theoretical frameworks seen in class. The videos will be shown in a screening session and students will provide oral reflections on their work during the presentation session.

### Research Project

30%

60 hours



## **Weighting**

## **Study time**

This assessment requires students to develop an original evidence-based argument that expands on their case-study literature review and responds to the feedback they received on the earlier assessment.

Students can choose to study a topic of their own choice/interest from the module, but this project should demonstrate a unique and original argument that is well-situated within the secondary literature (building on the case study assessment). Students may choose to write this project on a different topic than the literature review but this should be discussed with the instructor.

Students may choose to either submit a 2000-word essay or to present their findings in a 20-minute conference presentation. In either case, the assessment will be marked as a critical research essay and according to the same criteria on the 20-point Liberal Arts marking scale (with the exception of writing/presentation skills as this assessment allows students to develop whichever skillset they prefer).

## **Feedback on assessment**

Feedback will be provided on Tabula for all assessments. Pop quiz feedback will be provided on Moodle.

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## **Availability**

## **Courses**

This module is Core for:

- Year 1 of UVCA-LA99 Undergraduate Liberal Arts