

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

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

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

[Reading lists can be found in Talis](#)

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.

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.

Assessment

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

Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment component			
Pop Quizzes	15%	20 hours	No
Eight pop quizzes will take place randomly throughout the year. Each one will involve five 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).			
Reassessment component is the same			
Assessment component			
Group Reflection / Debate	15%	25 hours	Yes (extension)
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.			
Reassessment component			
Individual Reflection/Debate			Yes (extension)
Same as above, but individual rather than with a group.			
Assessment component			
Case Study Literature Review	15%	40 hours	Yes (extension)
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			

Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
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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.

Reassessment component is the same

Assessment component

Media Production (Investigative or Creative)	25%	40 hours	No
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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.

Reassessment component

Media Presentation (Reassessment)	No
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Same as above but individual rather than with a group.

Assessment component

Research Project	30%	60 hours	Yes (extension)
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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

Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
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).		

Reassessment component is the same

Feedback on assessment

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

Availability

Courses

This module is Core for:

- Year 1 of UVCA-LA99 Undergraduate Liberal Arts