HON305: Misinformation

Instructor Information
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Course Information

People often cling to beliefs about science, health, and/or politics that are unsupported or completely false. This course will explore the psychological and social factors that make people vulnerable to deceptive communication, misinformation, and conspiracy theories and why it is often very hard to correct misinformed beliefs. We will cover theories of cognitive biases, conformity, identity protection, motivated reasoning, and cultural cognition.

Course Purpose

This course connects social psychology, media studies, and cognitive science within an honors seminar to interrogate a relevant phenomena in our modern world: misinformation. The hope is that students who engage with this course will leave with a stronger understanding of their social and media environments, and be able to leverage that understanding in their personal and professional lives - regardless of college major or intended career field.

Upon completion of this course, students will be better able to:
- Articulate what misinformation and misperception are
- Explain basic theories of persuasion, bias, and cognition
- Identify misinformation and misperception in their daily lives as well as professionally
- Analyze media and information through multiple lenses to ascertain their connections to broader social arcs

This course additionally meets the following learning objectives from the Honors College:
1. Demonstrate critical thinking with an emphasis on appreciating ambiguity in the process of developing knowledge
2. Develop greater empathy and perspective by participating in discourse with the students across multiple disciplines and majors
3. Gain insight into how others have been shaped by perspectives and conditions different from one's own

Course Materials

Students will not need to purchase any textbook for this course. All readings will be provided on Blackboard. Students are expected to have access to the internet outside of class to access the readings and submit work.

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Assignments

<u>Introductory Statement</u>

This 1-2 page paper is due in the second week of class and is an opportunity for you to share your opinions and beliefs about the course topic. Cited sources are not required but encouraged if relevant. This paper should answer the following questions:

1. What are your career goals and how do you anticipate this course helping you achieve those goals?
2. What do you think misperception and misinformation are?
3. Can you identify any examples of these concepts in your personal life? How about in the media you consume?

This paper is an opportunity for me to assess your writing ability as well as your interests, so take it seriously. I will be using these papers to tweak the course and identify areas for growth for you all.

<u>Midterm Reflection Paper</u>

This 2-4 page paper is due in the middle of the term and is an opportunity for you to reflect on what you have learned in class thus far, or what you are struggling with. Cited sources are required as I expect you to cite materials we have covered in class. External sources are also encouraged but not required. Your works cited pages, and any images you include do not count towards your total page count. This paper should answer the following questions, if applicable:

1. What have you learned so far in class? What has been most interesting to you?
2. Are there any topics or ideas that have been confusing or tricky for you? What questions do you have that we haven't addressed yet?
3. Are you enjoying the class? What can I do to make the course better for you?

This paper is an opportunity for me to assess what you are getting out of the class. You will not lose points for admitting that something is confusing. I will be using these papers to tweak the course as needed, and also to assess whether you are getting anything from the class.

<u>Final Reflection Paper</u>

This 2-4 page paper is due at the end of term and is an opportunity for you to reflect on what you have learned, what remains challenging, and what next steps look like for you. Cited sources are required as I expect you to cite materials we have covered in class. External sources are also encouraged but not required. Your works cited pages, and any images you include do not count towards your total page count. This paper should answer the following question:

1. What are some ways you see the concepts covered in class come up in your daily life?

2. Has your thinking about misinformation changed at all over this term? How?
3. What practices or ideas from this class will you be taking with you?

Misinformation Moments

Each student must sign up by the 3rd week of class to lead **two** class discussions on a misinformation event of their choosing. Students are encouraged to be creative with how they lead class discussion - ideally it would not be *only* a powerpoint presentation. The discussion must include the following components:

1. A thorough description of the media or event at hand, including when it took place, what led to it, who the important stakeholders were, what its impact was, and what the student found interesting about it
2. Discussion by the entire class of how the different frameworks and theories covered in class can help us analyze this misinformation moment
3. Thoughts and strategies on how this specific kind of misinformation could be combatted in the future
4. Imagine you were in that context - do you think you would believe this item? Would you act on it? Why?

Grading

The points available for this class are as follows:

Assignment	Due Date	Points
Introductory Statement	9/30/25	15
Midterm Reflection	10/21/25	20
Final Reflection	12/4/25	25
Misinformation Moment 1	Lead discussion no later than 11/6/25	15
Misinformation Moment 2	Lead discussion no later than 12/4/25	25
TOTAL		100

The final grades in this class will be assigned as follows:

97-100%: A+	94-96%: A	91-93%: A-
87-90%: B+	84-86%: B	81-83%: B-
77-80%: C+	74-76%: C	71-73%: C-
67-70%: D+	64-66%: D	61-63%: D- (anything lower is an F)

Course Schedule

Week of…	Tuesday	Thursday
9/22/25	Introductions	How do we make decisions in groups? **Watch:** Crash Course video on Social Influence (10 minutes) **Read:** Tough Calls in *Scientific American*
9/29/25	How do we evaluate information? **Submit:** Introductory Statement **Watch:** What We're Missing in the Fight Against Misinformation (TedX talk by Dietram Scheufele, 14.5 minutes) **Read:** How Misinformation Spreads - And Why We Trust It in *Scientific American*	What is bias? How do biases form? **Watch:** Every Bias Explained in 8 Minutes **Read**: The Evolution of Cognitive Bias in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*
10/6/25	How data visualizations can be manipulative **Watch:** Crash Course video on Data & Infographics (13 minutes) **Watch**: Crash Course video on Evaluating Evidence (13.5 minutes)	How do attitudes change? **Read:** Attitudes can be Measured! But What is an Attitude? in *Social Cognition* **Read:** Attitudes and cognitive organization *in Journal of Psychology*
10/13/25	How do people process and organize information? **Watch**: Khan Academy video on Encoding Strategies (8.5 minutes) **Watch**: Khan Academy video on Information Processing Model (7.5 minutes)	The technology problem **Watch**: Crash Course video on Social Media (17 minutes) **Read:** E unibus pluram, by David Foster Wallace
10/20/25	How do beliefs drive information processing?	How does identity drive beliefs? **Read:** Cultural cognition of scientific

	Submit: Midterm Reflection **Read:** The case for motivated reasoning, in *Psychological bulletin*	consensus, in *Journal of Risk Research* **Read:** Culture and identity-protective cognition: Explaining the white-male effect in risk perception, in *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*
10/27/25	How do the people around us affect our beliefs and attitudes? **Read:** In Amish Country, the Future is Calling, in *The New York Times* **Watch**: How can you change someone's mind? (Ted-Ed talk, 4.5 minutes)	How can institutions impact our media diets? **Read:** We Interrupt This Program, by Douglas Rushkoff **Watch:** The five filters of the mass media machine (5 minutes)
11/3/25	The AI Problem - and broadly how do new technologies worsen the misinformation problem? **You must lead at least on Misinformation Moment by 11/6/25**	
11/10/25	2nd Misinformation Moment Discussions	
11/17/25		
11/24/25	**No class - Fall Break**	
12/1/25	2nd Misinformation Moment Discussions **Submit Final Reflections by 5pm on 12/4/25**	

Policies

<u>Participation policy</u> - Students are expected to come to class having done the reading and ready to ask questions and contribute meaningful thoughts. While there is no "participation grade," you will not get your money's worth if you are distracted, unprepared, asleep, disruptive, or otherwise non-participatory.

<u>Late policy</u> - Written submissions are due by 5pm, on Blackboard, on the day they are listed. I will not accept late submissions unless I receive an email by 5pm the preceding day explaining when you expect to complete the assignment. This policy exists because life does happen, but I reserve the right to not accept late submissions from a student who abuses this policy.

Formatting policy - All written submissions must follow these requirements to be eligible for all points available for that assignment:
- At least 2.5 pages, not including reference page: 1 inch margins, 12pt Times New Roman font, double spaced
- Have a left-justified single-spaced 4-line header on the first page with the following information: Your name, the class name, the date, and a title which encapsulates the gist of the paper (i.e. not "Essay 2")
- Make an argument - not just a summary of what you learned but an actual defended point based on your thoughts around the course material
- Contain distinct paragraphs of at least 3 sentences each, with clear intro and conclusion
- A reference page with citations in APA format

In-class discussion policy - The discussions in class may take a controversial turn from time to time. As college students, you should be able to hold space for disagreements and challenging opinions. In these discussions you are expected to only critique ideas, and never the person putting them forth. Any personal attacks or harassment will not be tolerated, and will be grounds for being asked to leave the class.

Personal computing device policy - The use of personal computers and phones in-class is expected and encouraged for note-taking, using search engines, accessing reading, and other activities relevant to class participation. However, habitual non-academic device use (e.g. texting, shopping, gaming, browsing social media, etc.) is grounds for being asked to leave the class. Additionally, I reserve the right to revert the class to a no-technology policy.

Artificial intelligence policy - The use of any artificial intelligence to produce, review, edit, or otherwise alter any part of your submissions for this course is grounds for a failing grade for that assignment. Additionally, it is *highly discouraged* to use artificial intelligence in the aiding of completing any readings.

Plagiarism policy - All submitted work must be independently conceptualized by the submitting student. Any words or ideas borrowed from another person must be cited in proper APA format. Failure to provide appropriate attribution, or any attempts to pass off another person's work as your own is grounds for failing the course and referral to the appropriate office. This policy is never up for debate as it is a foundational one in academia. Don't plagiarize.

Course Change Policy - I reserve the right to change or modify this course, and will communicate changes in class and via Blackboard.

Links to additional school policies - Students with Disabilities, Add/Drop Policy

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