

## **Alternative Facts: An Introduction to the Social Construction of Reality**

Spring 2018

Monday-Wednesday, 2:30-4pm

Room Seigle Hall 304

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### **Course Description**

Introduction to the concept of social construction—the idea that our ‘objective’ reality is shaped by our social positions and through social interactions. Recent political events and social conflicts highlight deep divisions in American society, raising critical questions about the media and objectivity (e.g., alternative facts and ‘fake’ news), networks and segregation (e.g., who talks to whom), who gets to decide what is viewed as ‘truth,’ and the role of researchers and academia in combating (or contributing to) misinformation. This course explores these questions with a sociological lens. We will use foundational sociological theories to learn how to recognize the existence of multiple realities, and consider the implications of social constructionism for key domains of everyday life, American politics, and the production of knowledge. We will also discuss the ways that cutting-edge technological innovations and academic research can—or cannot—help us distinguish facts from ‘alternative’ facts. Introductory level, no prerequisites.

### **Course Requirements**

All students are required to complete all readings/activities listed in the syllabus and to attend class. The readings and lectures may deal with controversial topics. You should respect the views and opinions of your classmates, and approach these topics with an open mind. Final grades will be based on the following course requirements (weight of each requirement in parentheses):

1. **Current Events Analyses (25 points)**: Five times during the first ten weeks of the semester you will select a current event and read news coverage of it from two sources: one that is considered ‘left-leaning’ and one that is considered ‘right-leaning’. (We will review the ideological perspectives of different news sources during the first week of class.) You will write a brief, 1-2 page (12 pt font, double spaced) memo that briefly summarizes the event, compares the coverage of the event from the two sources, and considers the implications of the coverage for politics/public knowledge. Each memo is worth 5 points (25 points total)

You must complete 5 news reactions during the first 10 weeks of the semester. You can choose how you structure this assignment (1 memo every other week, 1 memo per week the

first 5 weeks, etc.). Because you are being given flexibility in the due dates for this assignment, NO EXTENSIONS will be granted. I STRONGLY encourage you to make a schedule for yourself and stick to it, and to not schedule your final submission for week 10, so that you are able to catch up if you fall behind. Memos must be submitted on Blackboard. More information about these assignments will be shared during the first weeks of class.

2. Midterm In-Class Short-Essay Exam (20 points): This in-class midterm exam will take place the Wednesday before Spring Break (March 7<sup>th</sup>) and will consist of 4 short essay questions designed to tie together broad sets of ideas from our readings and class discussions. You will select 2 of the 4 short essay questions and have 1 class period to write your responses. You will be allowed to consult your (printed) notes and readings, but will not be allowed to consult with one another or receive any other external help or use a laptop. Given the timed nature of the exam, I **strongly encourage** you to brainstorm potential exam questions and outline answers to them as part of your studying for the exam. The essay questions will be designed to test your comprehension of the course material rather than your ability to memorize.
3. Media Diet Writing Assignment (15 points): This assignment will ask you to critically reflect on your 5 Current Events Analysis Memos as well as course readings and discussions to develop a set of ‘best practices’ for becoming a sociologically-guided consumer of news and current events. More details about this assignment will be shared in class. The assignment is due on Blackboard by 230pm on Monday, April 23.
4. Final Exam (30 points): The cumulative final exam for this course will be a combination of multiple choice and short-essay questions. You will be allowed to use your notes/readings during the exam (but not a laptop). The exam is cumulative and will cover content from the entire semester. More details about the exam will be shared in class.
5. Participation Pop Quizzes (10 points): You are expected to do the readings and to attend and participate in all class meetings. **Six times during the semester I will administer in-class pop-quizzes.** The quizzes will be designed to help you demonstrate to me that you are doing the readings and paying attention during class. The quizzes will be timed and closed-book/closed-note. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped at the end of the semester, giving everyone one free pass/do-over. **Note that missing class on a pop-quiz day will automatically result in a grade of zero.**

While the pop-quizzes will allow me to fairly evaluate your class attendance and engagement, the quality of the course will depend on active engagement and participation. I encourage you to think about all the ways you can contribute to this course, include asking questions and making comments during class, as well as asking questions and/or suggesting ideas, possible topics of discussion, connections between class topics and current events, etc. outside of class (i.e. in office hours or over email). Conversely, the course assistants and I will also pay attention to activities that negatively impacts others’ ability to participate in class, such as distracting use of laptops or other devices for non-class tasks – for the sake of all, I ask you to avoid such behaviors. Periodically, we will engage in smaller-group, active

“lab” activities, which do provide a fuller opportunity to contribute your ideas, questions, and critiques. Participation is especially important here.

**Major Assignment Due Dates** (*all assignments are submitted on Blackboard unless otherwise noted*)

*All 5 Current Event Analysis Assignments* due on Blackboard by **Monday, April 2 @ 230pm**

*Midterm exam* in class on **Wednesday, March 7<sup>th</sup>**

*Bias in Media Writing Assignment* due on Blackboard by **Monday, April 23 @ 230pm**

*Final Exam* **Wednesday, May 7<sup>th</sup> @ 330pm**

#### *Late Work and Extensions*

All deadlines in this course are firm. Due to the flexible nature of the *Current Events Analysis*, no extensions will be granted and no work submitted after the final due date of Monday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> at 2:30pm will be graded; for this assignment late work will receive an automatic score of zero.

For the *Media Diet Writing Assignment*, late work will be docked ½ letter grade per 24-hour period it is late. So if an assignment is due at 9am on Monday and you submit it on Monday night, the highest possible grade you can receive is an A-. Work submitted after the last day of class (e.g., after 230pm on Wednesday, April 25<sup>th</sup>) will receive an automatic score of zero.

The midterm and final exam dates are firm.

In general, if you have extenuating circumstances (family or medical emergency, etc.), you need to contact me as soon as possible so that we can work out an alternative schedule. While I am generally not inclined to give extensions, I am much more willing to do so if you come to me (days) **BEFORE** an assignment is due or exam is scheduled. Except in the rarest of cases, I do not grant last-minute or retroactive extensions.

I am here to support you and I am invested in your success; if you are struggling in class and/or falling behind on deadlines, **PLEASE** reach out as soon as possible so that we can find a solution.

#### *Computer/Technology Policy*

Research shows that students who use computers in class are more distracted and have poorer learning outcomes. If you are a student who truly benefits from using a laptop to take notes, you may do so. However, bringing your laptop/smart device to class and using it to engage with the course materials is not an invitation to be texting/emailing/on social media/etc. during class. This is disrespectful of me and your classmates, and it is distracting for everyone. **If this becomes a problem at any point throughout the semester, I reserve the right to revise the computer policy and ban all devices.**

Furthermore, **the midterm and final exams for this class are open-note but you will not be allowed to use a laptop or device.** Thus, I strongly encourage you to take notes in a notebook

and print your readings throughout the semester to make it easier for you to prepare for the exams.

### *Communication Policy*

Email will be the primary way we communicate with one another throughout the semester outside of class. Please check your email regularly. **If you have any questions about assignments, course materials, or attendance, please email your assigned course assistant. If the issue requires my personal attention the CAs will forward your email to me. Except in the case of an emergency, I will NOT respond to emails if you have not first corresponded with your CA.** You can expect myself and the CAs to reply to emails within 24 hours, 9 am- 5 pm, Monday-Friday. For example, if you write us at 9 pm on Friday, you can expect to hear from us by 5 pm on Monday. We may not check email in the evenings and on weekends.

### *Accommodations*

Washington University is committed to providing accommodations and/or services to students with documented disabilities. Students who are seeking support for a disability or a suspected disability should contact Disability Resources at 935-4153. Disability Resources is responsible for approving all disability-related accommodations for WU students, and students are responsible for providing faculty members with formal documentation of their approved accommodations at least two weeks prior to using those accommodations. We will accept Disability Resources VISA forms by email and in person. If you have already been approved for accommodations, we request that you provide a copy of your VISA within the first two weeks of the semester.

We are committed as well to offering academic accommodations to students who are victims of sexual assault. Students are eligible for accommodation regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. If you need to request such accommodations, please direct your request to Kim Webb (kim\_webb@wustl.edu or 935-8761), Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center, located on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Seigle Hall. This office provides resources confidentially; however, requests for accommodations will be shared with the appropriate University administration and faculty. The University will maintain as confidential any accommodations or protective measures provided to an individual student, so long as doing so does not impair the ability to provide such measures.

### **Required Books**

Gladstone, Brooke. 2017. *The Trouble with Reality: A Ruminantion on Moral Panic in Our Time*. NY: Workman Publishing.

Watts, Duncan J. 2011. *Everything Is Obvious: How Common Sense Fails Us*. NY: Crown Publishing.

All other readings are available on the course blackboard site. The required books should all be available at the bookstore. Please feel free to purchase used copies. If purchasing the books is a financial hardship for you, please contact me so that we can make alternative arrangements.

**Final Note:**

This syllabus is a living document, and I reserve the right to make changes during the semester as I work to make our class function as well as possible for everyone. I appreciate your patience and understanding!

**PART 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEM: IS ANYTHING REALLY REAL? WHO/WHAT CAN WE TRUST?**

**Course Introduction** – Wednesday 1/17

No readings ☺.

**Thinking Like a Sociologist-** Monday 1/22

Complete Course Survey (link will be emailed via BB a few days before class on Monday)

Read: Peter Berger. 1963. “An Invitation to Sociology” (BB)

**The Social Construction of Reality-** Wednesday 1/24

Read: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. “The Social Construction of Reality.” (BB)

**Media Bias-** Monday 1/29

Listen: “How Biased Is Your Media?” <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/how-biased-is-your-media/> (transcript also available from this link if you prefer to read) (38 minute podcast)

**‘Fake’ News-** Wednesday 1/31

Read or listen (same link): “Fake News Expert on How False Stories Spread and Why People Believe Them” <http://www.npr.org/2016/12/14/505547295/fake-news-expert-on-how-false-stories-spread-and-why-people-believe-them>

In class we will review expectations for the *Current Event Analysis* Assignments. After class on 1/31 you will start being able to submit your CEAs. You cannot submit more than 1 CEA per calendar week, and you must submit **five CEAs by 2:30pm on Monday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>**.

**Can Numbers Lie? -** Monday 2/5

Read: “4 Possible Reasons The Polls Got It So Wrong This Year”

<https://www.npr.org/2016/11/14/502014643/4-possible-reasons-the-polls-got-it-so-wrong-this-year>

**Does the Media Get Anything Right?-** Wednesday 2/7

You are responsible for watching the movie *Spotlight*, which is available on Netflix. Take notes while watching the movie about connections you see to our class readings and discussions—we will discuss in class on Monday and the movie will be fair game for future pop-quizzes/exams.

You can watch the movie on your own or watch with the class (note it is 2 hours so class will go till 430pm). We will email the room assignment for movie watching.

**Reality Depends on Who You're With - Monday 2/12**

Read: Clayton Childress. 2012. "All media are social" (BB)

**Can You Trust Researchers? -Wednesday 2/14**

If your CA is Kate, read: "The Case of the Amazing Gay-Marriage Data: How a Graduate Student Reluctantly Uncovered a Huge Scientific Fraud."

<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/how-a-grad-student-uncovered-a-huge-fraud.html>

If your CA is Bem, read: "The Internet Accused Alice Goffman of Faking Details in Her Study of a Black Neighborhood. I Went to Philadelphia to Check."

<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/06/i-fact-checked-alice-goffman-with-her-subjects.html>

**PART 2: LEARNING TO SEE MULTIPLE REALITIES THROUGH SOCIOLOGY**

**The Myth of Common Sense – Monday 2/19**

Read: Chapter 1, *Everything is Obvious*

**Common Sense: Do Vaccines Cause Autism?- Wednesday 2/21**

Peter Bearman. 2010. "Just-so Stories: Vaccines, Autism, and the Single-bullet Disorder." (BB)

**The Myth of Rational Actors- Monday 2/26**

Read: Chapter 2, *Everything is Obvious*

**Reality Depends on Who You Are- Wednesday 2/28**

Read: Patricia Hill Collins. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought" (BB)

**Reality Depends on Who's in Charge- Monday 3/5**

Read: "Wikipedia's Hostility to Women"

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/how-wikipedia-is-hostile-to-women/411619/>

**In-Class Midterm Exam- Wednesday 3/7**

**Monday 3/12 and Wednesday 3/14 no class for Spring Break!**

**PART 3: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL NETWORKS: HOW KNOWLEDGE SPREADS AND GROWS (AND WHY SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T)**

**Network Society- Monday 3/19**

Read: Chapter 3, *Everything is Obvious*

**Network Society (Part 2)- Wednesday 3/21**

Read: *Connected, Chapter 6* (BB)

**Networks and Inequality (Part 1)- Monday 3/26**

Read: "Friends with Academic Benefits"

<https://contexts.org/articles/friends-with-academic-benefits/>

**Networks and Inequality (Part 2) - Wednesday 3/28**

Read: "How Violence Warps Childhood Friendships in Chicago"

<https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/how-violence-warps-childhood-friendships-in-chicago.html>

**Social Influence in Networks- Monday 4/2**

Read: Chapter 4, *Everything is Obvious*

\*\*Reminder: All 5 CEA assignments due on BB by 230pm!\*\*

PART 4: ARE DATA SCIENCE AND AI THE SOLUTION OR PART OF THE PROBLEM?

**Case for Optimism-Wednesday 4/4**

Read: Chapter 10, *Everything is Obvious*

**And Causes for Concern (Part 1)- Monday 4/9**

Listen: "AI Learns from Us. So It Learns Bias." <http://www.wnyc.org/story/deep-learning-racism/>

**And Causes for Concern (Part 2)- Wednesday 4/11**

Read: "A college professor's two-and-a-half year project has brought the cutting edge of police work out of the shadows" <http://money.cnn.com/2017/09/11/technology/future/lapd-big-data-palantir/index.html>

PART 5: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOW DONALD TRUMP BECAME THE PRESIDENT AND WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

**The Trouble with Reality- Monday 4/16**

Read: Brooke Gladstone. *The Trouble with Reality* [Heads up: the book is a fast read but this is a significantly longer reading assignment than usual; plan ahead!]

**How the Right Lost Its Mind- Wednesday 4/18**

Read: Charlie Sykes. "How the Right Lost Its Mind and Embraced Donald Trump"

<http://www.newsweek.com/2017/09/29/right-lost-mind-embraced-donald-trump-668180.html>

**Fighting for Facts in the 'Alternative Facts' Era- Monday 4/23**

No reading!

\*\*Reminder: Media Diet Writing Assignment due on BB by 230pm!\*\*

**Final Exam Review - Wednesday 4/25**

Look over your course notes and come with questions!

**Final Exam: Wednesday, May 7<sup>th</sup> 330-530pm**