

Course Title	: <i>Information, Misinformation, and the Media</i>
Course Code	: CLE9035
Recommended Study Year	: Any
No. of Credits/Term	: 3
Mode of Tuition	: Sectional
Class Contact Hours	: Two 1.5 hour classes per week
Category	: Cluster Course (Values, Cultures and Societies)
Prerequisite	: Nil
Co-requisite	: Nil
Exclusion	: Nil
Exemption Requirement	: Nil

Brief Course Description:

The rise of social media and the growing dominance of the internet have made becoming an informed member of society simultaneously easier and harder than ever before. On the one hand, we can now access, from within our homes, academic research, government statistics, NGO reports, and newspapers from around the world. The internet has also brought about a radical democratization in the ability to *produce* information: alternative media is now cheaper than ever to set up, and blogging and large social media websites allow ordinary citizens to broadcast their opinions to a global audience, leading to more diversity in public discourse than at any time in the past. These same features, however, have also made it harder to stay informed. Ordinary citizens cannot easily evaluate the credibility of academic research or the significance of government statistics on their own. The ability to search out news stories makes it easier to reconfirm our preexisting biases. Alternative media may not follow ordinary journalistic standards, and at the most extreme may simply manufacture propaganda. Social media has aided the spread of dangerous conspiracy theories and opened new platforms for violent extremists to recruit followers. The ease with which people can be publicly criticized may lead to more self-censorship.

This class will approach these issues from the perspective of *social epistemology*, which examines how evidence, knowledge, understanding and learning depend on aspects of social life, from individual testimony, to publicly recognized standards of expertise, to institutions and conventions that facilitate the spread of good information and check the spread of bad. We will look at how we are dependent on experts and the testimony of others for much of our knowledge, and how knowledge progresses through a collaborative project of sharing information, ideas and criticism. This allows each of us to know more and utilize more information than any one of us could collect and evaluate individually. At the same time, it makes us vulnerable to various forms of disinformation. This framework will be used to examine questions about our ethical obligations to critically assess sources, strategies for recognizing how our information may be inaccurate or biased, and questions about whether legal or institutional reform is needed to control the spread of fake news.

Aims:

The aims of this course are (1) to understand the general epistemic issues surrounding testimony, expert opinion, disagreement and the role of information in society; (2) to discuss the special epistemic problems raised by traditional mass media and modern social media; (3) to reflect on how to become more critical media consumers and creators in one's personal life; and (4) to reflect on how institutions should improve access to information while reducing the spread of disinformation.

Learning Outcomes (LOs):

On completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Explain basic concepts in social epistemology, such as testimony, expertise, disagreement, epistemic networks, the marketplace of ideas, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles.
2. Apply these concepts to real life cases, such as historic misinformation campaigns or contemporary conspiracy theories.
3. Critically evaluate how our knowledge of the world is influenced by media bias (including biases introduced by algorithms).
4. Assess the ethical issues surrounding fake news, partisan media, free speech, and private censorship.
5. Utilize strategies for identifying misleading claims or non-credible sources.

Indicative Content:

1. Basics of social epistemology
2. Importance of expertise, trust, and cognitive division of labor
3. Epistemic networks and scientific progress
4. Misinformation in epistemic networks
5. Fake news and conspiracy theories as misinformation in an epistemic network
6. Freedom of speech and modern complications
7. Media bias (and how algorithms influence what information you see)
8. How to be more savvy and responsible about media
9. Institutional obligations

Teaching Methods:

Two 1.5 hour sections per week. Students will do readings selected for the relevance to ILOs 1-5. The instructor will then use a combination of lectures and guided student discussion to on the issues and topics addressed in the reading to promote ILOs 1-5. The instructor will also use the marking of the short reflective essays (see below) as an opportunity to provide feedback to the students, in order to help them achieve ILOs 1-5.

Course Assessment and Measurement of ILOs:

Student performance will be assessed in a variety of ways. Students will be assessed on the basis of participation in class, according to the system explained in the course participation policy. Students will also be asked to write three short reflective essays (of approximately 300-500 words) over the course of the semester. Students will complete a quiz at the end of the class period to demonstrate knowledge of the key concepts of the class. Finally, students will complete a final take-home essay examination.

Class Participation	20%
Measures LO's 1-5	
Short Reflective essays	30%
Measures LO's 1-5	
Final Review Quiz	10%
Measures LO's 1-2	
Take Home Essay Exam	40%
Measures LO's 1-5	

Essential Readings:

Readings will be available in the library on reserve or provided on Moodle.

Books

The primary reading for the class will be:

The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread, by Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, Yale University Press, 2019.

We will also use excerpts and chapters from the following books:

Meditations (Early Modern Texts version), Rene Descartes, translated by Jonathan Bennett,

<http://earlymoderntexts.com>.

Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy, Carl Fox and Joe Saunders (eds.), Routledge, 2019.

Media Ethics: A Philosophical Approach, Matthew Kieran, Praeger, 1997.

The Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to On Liberty (Early Modern Texts version), J. S. Mill, language updated by Jonathan Bennett,

<http://earlymoderntexts.com>.

Global Warming, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

Media Literacy, 9th Edition, by James W. Potter, Sage Publications, 2019.

Scholarly articles

We will also read the following articles (in whole or in part):

Alfano, Mark, Joseph Adam Carter and Marc Cheong (2018) “Technological Seduction and Self-Radicalization,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 3: 298-322.

Alfano, Mark, and Neil Levy (2020) “Knowledge from Vice: Deeply Social Epistemology,” *Mind* 129/515: 887-915.

Dentith, M.R.X. (2018) “Expertise and Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Social Epistemology* 32/3: 196-208.

Fricke, Miranda (2008) “Precis to *Epistemic Injustice*,” *Theoria* 23/1: 69-71.

Gurieva, Sergeï, Nikita Melnikov and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya (2019), “3G Internet and Confidence in Government,” *Sciences Po Economics Discussion Paper*.

Hardwig, John (1985) “Epistemic Dependence,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 82/7: 335-49.

Levy, Neil (2019) “Due Deference to Denialism: Explaining Ordinary People’s Rejection of Established Scientific Findings,” *Synthese* 196/1: 313-27.

Levy, Neil (2019) “No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, Or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5/4: 487-502.

Nguyen, C. Thi (2020) “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme* 17/2: 141-61.

Nguyen, C. Thi, and Bekka Williams (2020) “Moral Outrage Porn,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Epistemology* 18/2.

Sunstein, Cass (2009) “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17/2: 202-27.

Watson, Lani (2018) “Systematic Epistemic Rights Violations in the Media: A Brexit Case Study,” *Social Epistemology* 32/2: 88-102.

Online Resources and Relevant Journalism

“The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers,” Jay Rosen, *Press Think*, <https://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/>.

“MK Ultra,” *History.com*, <https://www.history.com/topics/us-government/history-of-mk-ultra>.

“Iran-Contra Affair,” *History.com*, https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/iran-contra-affair#section_2.

“Tracking QAnon: How Trump Turned Conspiracy Theory Research Upside Down,” Jeff Tollefson, *Nature*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00257-y>.

“Why Trump’s Latest Covid-19 Conspiracy Theory Is Especially Dangerous,” Liam Hess, *Vogue*, <https://www.vogue.com/article/trump-covid-doctors-claim-michigan-campaign-rally>.

“Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in China Are Wildly Different than in the U.S.,” Kaiping Chen, *Fast Company*, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90599673/china-covid-19-conspiracy-theories>.

“Covid-19 Misinformation on Chinese Social Media – Lessons for Countering Conspiracy Theories,” Kaiping Chen, Cuihua Shen, Jingwen Zhang, Anfan Chen, and Jingbo Meng, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-misinformation-on-chinese-social-media-lessons-for-countering-conspiracy-theories-150718>.

“Anatomy of a Conspiracy: With Covid, China Took a Leading Role,” Erika Kinetz, *Associated Press*, <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-beijing-only-on-ap-epidemics-media-122b73e134b780919cc1808f3f6f16e8>.

“Why Are Some Hong Kong Democracy Activists Supporting Trump’s Bid to Cling to Power?” Helen Davidson, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/13/trump-presidency-hong-kong-pro-democracy-movement>.

“Social Media is Warping Democracy,” Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>.

“Coronavirus, ‘Plandemic’ and the Seven Traits of Conspiratorial Thinking,” John Cook et al, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-plandemic-and-the-seven-traits-of-conspiratorial-thinking-138483>.

“Online Conspiracy Theorists Are More Diverse (and Ordinary) than Most Assume,” Colin Klein, Peter Clutton and Vince Polito, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/online-conspiracy-theorists-are-more-diverse-and-ordinary-than-most-assume-92022>.

“The Raging Controversy Over the NBA, China, and the Hong Kong Protests, Explained,” Matt Yglesias, *Vox*, <https://www.vox.com/2019/10/7/20902700/daryl-morey-tweet-china-nba-hong-kong>.

“Mulan: Why Disney’s Latest Reboot Is Facing Boycott Calls,” *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-54024810>.

“Behind Disney’s Firing of ‘Mandalorian’ Star Gina Carano,” *Hollywood Reporter*, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/behind-disneys-firing-of-mandalorian-star-gina-carano>.

“Facebook Admits It Was Used to Incite Violence in Myanmar,” Alexandra Stevenson, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/myanmar-facebook.html>.

“Why Depicting the Prophet Muhammad Is Controversial in Islam,” Namo Abdulla, Ezel Sahinkaya, Mehdi Jedinia, and Roshan Noorzai, *Voice of America News*, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/why-depicting-prophet-muhammad-controversial-islam>.

“Gab, the Alt-Right’s Very Own Twitter, Is the Ultimate Filter Bubble,” Emma Grey Ellis, *Wired*, <https://www.wired.com/2016/09/gab-alt-rights-twitter-ultimate-filter-bubble/>.

Students are also encouraged to read the articles listed at:

“Articles on Expert Guide to Conspiracy Theories,” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/us/topics/expert-guide-to-conspiracy-theories-83678>.

Important Notes

- (a) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (b) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person’s work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student’s own work”. Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.
- (c) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (d) To enhance students’ understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course “Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness” is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>.