

CRITICAL DISINFORMATION STUDIES

A SYLLABUS

PROPOSED BY:
Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life

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ABOUT

This syllabus is a critical evaluation of dominant narratives in scholarship and media accounts which center the post-2016 period and social media platforms in the spread of disinformation. Such accounts imply that "fake news," disinformation, and inauthentic online behavior (like bots) contributed to the success of far-right populist campaigns like Brexit and the Trump presidency. These narratives blame social platforms for spreading, facilitating, and encouraging disinformation, and suggest that prior to the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles, people shared a common understanding of truth and falsehood. They rarely examine the role of other actors in the media ecosystem, frequently ignore the considerable literature on propaganda and persuasion that existed prior to 2016, and even less frequently interrogate the notion of a common episteme.

In contrast, this syllabus:

- Explores the role of legacy media in spreading disinformation campaigns,
- Critiques the myth of an epistemically consistent past, and,
- Highlights the role of intersectional power differentials and appeals to white identity in past and present disinformation campaigns.

We also wish to expand the definition of what "counts" as disinformation by highlighting historical episodes in which politicians and media outlets strategically spread false and misleading narratives to support the maintenance of structural inequality. We argue that disinformation is a key way in which whiteness in the United States has been reinforced and reproduced, and we encourage scholars of mis/disinformation to interrogate power differentials more broadly and race specifically when discussing disinformation.

This syllabus focuses primarily on the United States, reflecting the state of the field. We recognize the limitations of this and encourage scholars to think through how false information is conceptualized in different political, social, and cultural contexts rather than applying the concept of "disinformation" uncritically.

While this is an interdisciplinary syllabus, its contributors are primarily from Communication and Media Studies. This syllabus is open-source and may be used by anyone for any scholarly or educational purpose without attribution. Please [drop us a line](#) if you have suggestions for readings or topics.



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Each section includes recommended readings. Some sections include audiovisual material and primary sources. The intended audience for this syllabus is graduate students, faculty, and researchers interested in "disinformation" writ large. It can be adapted for undergraduate audiences as well.

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DEFINING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is false or misleading information that is intentionally spread for profit, to create harm, or to advance political or ideological goals. As Freelon & Wells show, disinformation was virtually absent from scholarship before 2016, when it became a primary issue of concern. This ignores a very long history of propaganda and persuasion tied to corporations, mass media, and state interests. Moreover, disinformation's current form is rooted in the weakening of trust in democratic institutions like the press, the judiciary, and political parties, the political economy of mass and social media, and the increased influence of extremist, conspiratorial, and fringe communities. Given this disconnect, it is worth asking how disinformation and related terms like "fake news" operate both politically and culturally.

READINGS

Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). [Disinformation as political communication](#). *Political Communication*, 37(2), 145–156.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2021). [A brief history of the disinformation age: Information wars and the decline of institutional authority](#). In W.L. Bennett & S. Livingston (Eds.), *The disinformation age* (pp. 3-40). Cambridge University Press.

Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). [Media manipulation and disinformation online](#). Data & Society Research Institute. [Bonus: Syllabus and teaching guide](#)

Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2018). [Fake news as a floating signifier: Hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood](#). *Javnost - The Public*, 25(3), 298–314.

Kreiss, D. (2021). [Book review: Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform](#). *International Journal of Press/Politics*, online before print, 1-8.

Jack, C. (2017). [Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information](#). Data & Society Research Institute. [Bonus: Teaching guide](#)



THE MYTH OF THE EPISTEMICALLY CONSISTENT PAST

Disinformation studies often assumes that for much of the 20th century, members of the public shared a common understanding and sense of what was true, driven by mass media. This is not the case. Inspired by Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan, this section highlights the role of media in maintaining separate racial epistemologies and the strategic absence of the concerns of marginalized groups from public agendas. Indeed, the latter three readings explore how power, race, and imperialism contribute to the legitimizing of knowledge and truth, such as making and recording historical information.

READINGS

Mejia, R., Beckermann, K., & Sullivan, C. (2018). [White lies: A racial history of the \(post\)truth](#). *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 109–126.

Alabama Public Radio (2013, December 11) [How the media covered the Civil Rights Movement: Black newspapers](#). Apr.org.

Almeida, S. (2015). [Race-based epistemologies: The role of race and dominance in knowledge production](#). *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*, 13, 79-105.

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). Ch. 1 Imperialism, history, writing and theory (pp. 1-41) and Ch. 3 Colonizing knowledges (pp. 58-77). In [Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples](#). Zed Books/University of Otago Press.

Trouillot, M. R. (1995). [Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History](#). Beacon Press.

PRIMARY SOURCES

[The Black Press Research Collective](#)

Maintains an extensive set of links to digitized Black newspapers and a bibliography of scholarship on the Black Press.

DISINFORMATION IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

"Disinformation" has origins in the Cold War, a loan word from the Russian "dezinformatsiya," coined during the Stalin era. There are different cultural understandings of what is considered legitimate and illegitimate forms of persuasion, and "disinformation," as it has been operationalized in the US since 2016, reflects a particular history and set of commitments. These readings lead us to reflect on what deliberately false information might look like in other contexts, and how analytic concepts developed in the US may limit our understanding and proposed solutions.



READINGS

Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., & Moyo, D. (2019). ["Fake news" and cyber-propaganda in sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the research agenda.](#) *African Journalism Studies* 40(4), 1-12.

Madrid-Morales, D., Wasserman, H., Gondwe, G., Ndlovu, K., Sikanku, E., Tully, M., Umejei, E., & Uzuegbunam, C. (2021). [Motivations for sharing misinformation: A comparative study in six Sub-Saharan African countries.](#) *International Journal Of Communication*, 15, 20.

Han, R. (2015). [Defending the authoritarian regime online: China's "voluntary fifty-cent army."](#) *The China Quarterly*, (224), 1006-1025.

Lim, G. (2020). [Securitize/counter-securitize: The life and death of Malaysia's anti-fake news act.](#) Data & Society Research Institute.

Haque, M. M., Yousuf, M., Alam, A. S., Saha, P., Ahmed, S. I., & Hassan, N. (2020). [Combating misinformation in Bangladesh: Roles and responsibilities as perceived by journalists, fact-checkers, and users.](#) *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW2), 1-32.

Ong, J. C. (2021, January 12). [Southeast Asia's disinformation crisis: Where the state is the biggest bad actor and regulation is a bad word.](#) *Items: Insights from the social sciences*. Social Science Research Council.

Chandra, P., & Pal, J. (2019). [Rumors and collective sensemaking: Managing ambiguity in an informal marketplace.](#) *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conf on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-12.



CASE STUDY: CRIME & ANTI-BLACK DISINFORMATION

This case study postulates conceptualizing systemic, racist media coverage as strategic disinformation. In doing so, we connect current disinformation campaigns that draw on racist stereotypes to their antecedents, and de-emphasize the novelty of social media as a communicative medium. The "Central Park Five" is an egregious example of anti-Blackness in which racist mythologizing was used to justify sentencing children as adults and the massive increases in incarceration during the 1990s and 2000s.

READINGS

"Behind every news story advancing a dominant racial ideology lie discarded counter-narratives, ignored cultural meanings, and omitted counter-stereotypical information."

—Bryan Adamson

Gilliam, F. D., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Wright, O. (1996). [Crime in black and white: The violent, scary world of local news.](#) *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(3), 6-23.

Duru, N. J. (2004). [The Central Park Five, The Scottsboro Boys, and the myth of the bestial black man.](#) *Cardozo Law Review*, 25(4), 1315-1365.

Adamson, B. (2016). [Thugs, crooks, and rebellious Negroes: racist and racialized media coverage of Michael Brown and the Ferguson demonstrations.](#) *Harvard Journal of Racial & Ethnic Justice*, 32, 189-278.

Noble, S. (2014). [Teaching Trayvon: Race, media, and the politics of spectacle.](#) *The Black Scholar* 44(1), 12-29.

AUDIOVISUAL

DuVernay, A. (2019). *When they see us*. [TV Miniseries]. Netflix.

CASE STUDY: JAPANESE INCARCERATION

During World War Two, the press served as a state "guard dog," writing favorably about the government and dominant groups while emphasizing the (alleged) threat to national security presented by Japanese-Americans. Journalists used government and military sources while virtually ignoring Japanese-Americans, producing coverage that firmly supported the power structure. The US government strategically leveraged euphemistic language like "evacuation" and "non-aliens" rather than "forced removal" and "citizens" to normalize incarceration, and banned cameras in the camps to (unsuccessfully) prevent the dissemination of counterimages. As a result, incarceration is characterized by silence and secrecy, and rarely appears in popular texts about WW2.



READINGS

Bishop, R. (2000). [To protect and serve: The "guard dog" function of journalism in coverage of the Japanese-American Internment.](#) *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 2(2), 64–104.

Sturken, M. (1997). [Absent images of memory: Remembering and reenacting the Japanese internment.](#) *Positions* 5(3), 687-707.

Simpson, C. C. (2001). Introduction (pp. 1-11) and Ch.1 That faint and elusive insinuation: Remembering internment and the dawn of the postwar (pp. 12-42). In [An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945-1960](#). Duke University Press.

Japanese American Citizens League (2013, April 27). [The power of words: A guide to language about Japanese Americans in World War II, understanding euphemisms and preferred terminology.](#) National JACL Power of Words II Committee.

PRIMARY SOURCES

[Library of Congress. Japanese-American Internment Camp Newspapers, 1942 to 1946.](#)

[Densho Digital Repository](#): A grassroots organization dedicated to preserving, educating, and sharing the story of World War II-era incarceration of Japanese Americans.



CASE STUDY: MEDIA ACTIVISM AND THE AIDS CRISIS

The HIV/AIDS crisis illustrates how the suppression of information, as well as the spread of false information, can cause harm. It also provides a striking case study in the politics of knowledge production. Before reliable information about a phenomenon can be made available, it must be made, period, and a novel virus that manifests dramatically differently in distinct populations highlights the ways that pre-existing identities and power relations shape both processes. These readings explore the silence and stigma that federal and state governments and many legacy media institutions maintained around the “plague” for years in the United States. They document interventions by media activists who engaged in citizen science, community health projects, and public spectacle in order to save lives. Such activists set new media agendas and developed communication practices that were subsequently adopted by the US Surgeon General and globalized by international organizations.

READINGS

Perez, T. L., & Dionisopoulos, G. N. (1995). [Presidential silence, C. Everett Koop, and the surgeon general's report on AIDS.](#) *Communication Studies*, 46(1-2), 18-33.

Juhasz, A. (1995). [AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video.](#) Duke University Press.

Cheng, J.F. (2020). [AIDS, women of color feminisms, queer and trans of color critiques, and the crises of knowledge production.](#) In Cheng, J.F., Juhasz, A., & Shahani, N. (Eds.), *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (pp. 76-92). Duke University Press.

Brier, J. (2009). Marketing Safe Sex. In [Infectious Ideas: US Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis](#) (pp. 45-77). UNC Press.

AUDIOVISUAL

Hubbard, J. & Schulman, S. (2012). [United In Anger: A History of ACT UP.](#) [Film, 93 min.]

Christovale, E., & Crockett, V. (2017). [Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings.](#) [Film] Visual AIDS.

CASE STUDY: THE WELFARE QUEEN

Rooted in racial, classed, and gendered stereotypes that were both anti-Black and anti-poor, this trope stigmatized state distribution of public benefits that legitimated the reduction of welfare in later policy reform. Ronald Reagan was one of the first to use this term publicly and a central actor in its spread, demonstrating the long history of mainstream political actors creating and spreading disinformation to serve political interests and influence public discourse. By conceptualizing the "welfare queen" as an example of strategic disinformation, we can trace a throughline to more recent instances such as framing civil rights as "special rights," constructing immigrants as "invaders" and "bad hombres," and devising the specter of the "bathroom predator" to suppress transgender rights.

READINGS

Covert, B. (2019, July 2). [The myth of the welfare queen](#). *The New Republic*.

Hancock, A. M. (2003). [Contemporary welfare reform and the public identity of the "welfare queen."](#) *Race, Gender & Class*, 10(1), 31-59.

Nadasen, P. (2004). Introduction (pp. xiii-xix) and Ch. 1: The origins of the welfare rights movement (pp. 1-43). In [Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States](#). Routledge.

Cassiman, S. A. (2008). [Resisting the neo-liberal poverty discourse: On constructing deadbeat dads and welfare queens](#). *Sociology Compass*, 2(5), 1690-1700.

Cohen, C. (1997). [Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: The radical potential of queer politics?](#) *GLQ* 3(4), 437-465.





CASE STUDY: DISINFORMATION, REPRESSION, & BLACK LIBERATION

These readings explore the relationship between the state, anti-communism, 20th century Black liberation movements, and the news media. Specifically, these works complicate the role of the news media by positioning news organizations as both a corrective for anti-Black propaganda and a distributor of disinformation aimed at repressing Black activism. To repress Black social movements, state actors used terms like patriotic, anti-communist, and anti-American as rhetorical devices to maintain dominant narratives, which news media both resisted and furthered. This week points to how a lack of source diversity or the reliance on a singular account of events contributes to disinformation, particularly in the case of Black freedom movements.

READINGS

Davenport, C. (2009). [Media bias, perspective, and state repression: The Black Panther Party.](#) Cambridge University Press.

Lieberman, R. (2014). [The long black and red scare: Anti-Communism and the African American freedom struggle.](#) In Goldstein R.J. (Ed.), *Little “red scares”: Anti-communism and political repression in the United States, 1921-1946* (pp. 261–288). Taylor & Francis.

Zeigler, J. (2015). [Red scare racism and Cold War black radicalism.](#) Uni. Press of Mississippi.

AUDIOVISUAL & PRIMARY SOURCES

Alegria, A., Hemphill, P., Johnson, A., & Marks, C. (2010, October 17). [Cointelpro 101.](#) [Videorecording]. The Freedom Archives.

The [FBI's documents on civil rights,](#) including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael and so forth, and the [FBI files on the Black Panther party](#)

[Black Panther Party Community News](#) archives maintained by the Freedom Archive

The [Digital Public Library of America's archive of the Black Power Movement](#)

DISINFORMATION AND IDENTITY CLAIMS

Drawing on examples from political campaigns, ads, mainstream news, and hyper-partisan media, this set of readings examine narrative appeals to identity (particularly white identity) that draw on “deep stories” (Polletta and Callahan, 2017) and “deep frames” (Phillips and Milner, 2021). As Alamo-Pastrana and Hoynes point out, the historical foundations of mainstream news media as white media rely upon racialized cultural authority. These drawings draw attention to how identity-based frameworks and the reproduction of racial inequality connect to partisan political identity.

READINGS

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2020). [Political identity ownership: Symbolic contests to represent members of the public](#). *Social Media + Society* 6(2), 1-5.

Alamo-Pastrana, C., & Hoynes, W. (2018). [Racialization of news: Constructing and challenging professional journalism as “white media”](#). *Humanity & Society*, 44(1), 67-91.

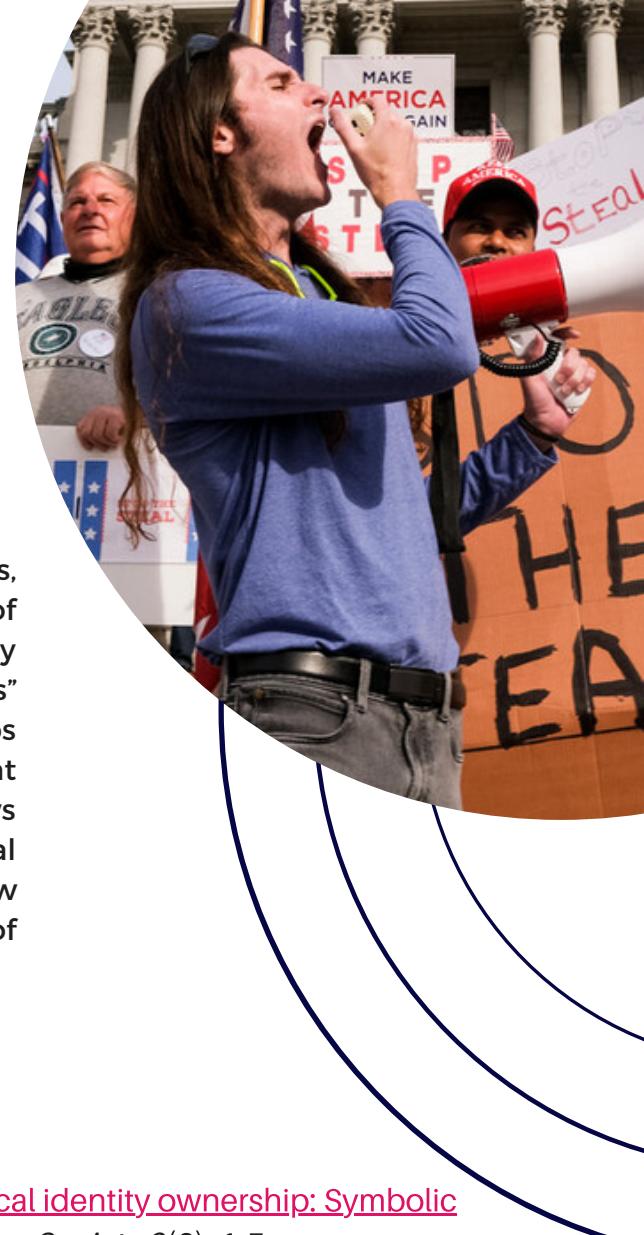
Polletta, F., & Callahan, J. (2017). [Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: Storytelling in the Trump era](#). *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 5(3), 392-408.

Phillips, W., & Milner, R. (2021). [The devil’s in the deep frames](#). In *You are here: A field guide for navigating polarized speech, conspiracy theories and our polluted information landscape*. MIT Press, 17-48.

Peck, R. (2019). [Fox populism: Branding conservatism as working class](#). Cambridge University Press.

Jardina, A. (2019). [White consciousness and white prejudice: Two compounding forces in contemporary American politics](#). *The Forum*, 17(3), 447-466.

McIlwain, C. & Caliendo, S. (2013) [Mitt Romney's racist appeals: How race was played in the 2012 Presidential election](#). *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(9), 1157-1168.





LEVERAGING INEQUALITY IN DISINFORMATION AND “FAKE NEWS”

Contemporary disinformation often pivots on racial stereotypes, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and other expressions of structural inequality. In other words, ‘old’ racial and colonial tropes propagate on new media forms. From memes, hashtags, and other discursive tools of social media (Flores-Yeffal et al 2019), this set of readings highlight how racial histories and stereotypes operate within and across communities. For example, Freelon et al (2020) draw our attention to the role of race in the targeting and consumption of disinformation, connecting racial asymmetries to ideological ones.

READINGS

Freelon, D., Bossetta, M., Wells, C., Lukito, J., Xia, Y., & Adams, K. (2020). [Black trolls matter: Racial and ideological asymmetries in social media disinformation](#). *Social Science Computer Review*.

Nkonde, M., Rodriguez, M. Y., Cortana, L., Mukogosi, J. K., King, S., Serrato, R., Martinez, N., Drummer, M., Lewis, A., & Malik, M. M. (2021). [Disinformation creep: ADOS and the strategic weaponization of breaking news](#). *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1(7).

Flores-Yeffal, N. Y., Vidales, G., & Martinez, G. (2019). [#WakeupAmerica, #Illegalsarecriminals: The role of the cyber public sphere in the perpetuation of the Latino cyber-moral panic in the US](#). *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(3), 402-419.

Daniels, J. (2009). [Cloaked websites: propaganda, cyber-racism and epistemology in the digital era](#). *New Media and Society*, 11(5): 659-683.

Tuters, M. and Hagen, S. (2019). [\(\(They\)\) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan](#). *New Media and Society*, 22(12): 2218-2237.

DISINFORMATION AND DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT: COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the profound ways that race, class, and gender inequalities shape health outcomes in the United States and beyond. It has also inspired debates about how to account for and ameliorate such differences, given the absence of national standards for how demographic data about COVID patients should be recorded. In addition to such questions of knowledge production, readings in this unit focus on the factors that shape different communities' trust, or (sometimes historically warranted) distrust, of official information about COVID. They also document how prominent political actors including former President Donald Trump and India's Home Minister Amit Shah have mischaracterized the pandemic and its origins using racist and xenophobic tropes, demonstrating that these official disinformation campaigns have correlated with increased hostility and violence toward the groups they target—namely, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States and Muslims in South and Southeast Asia.

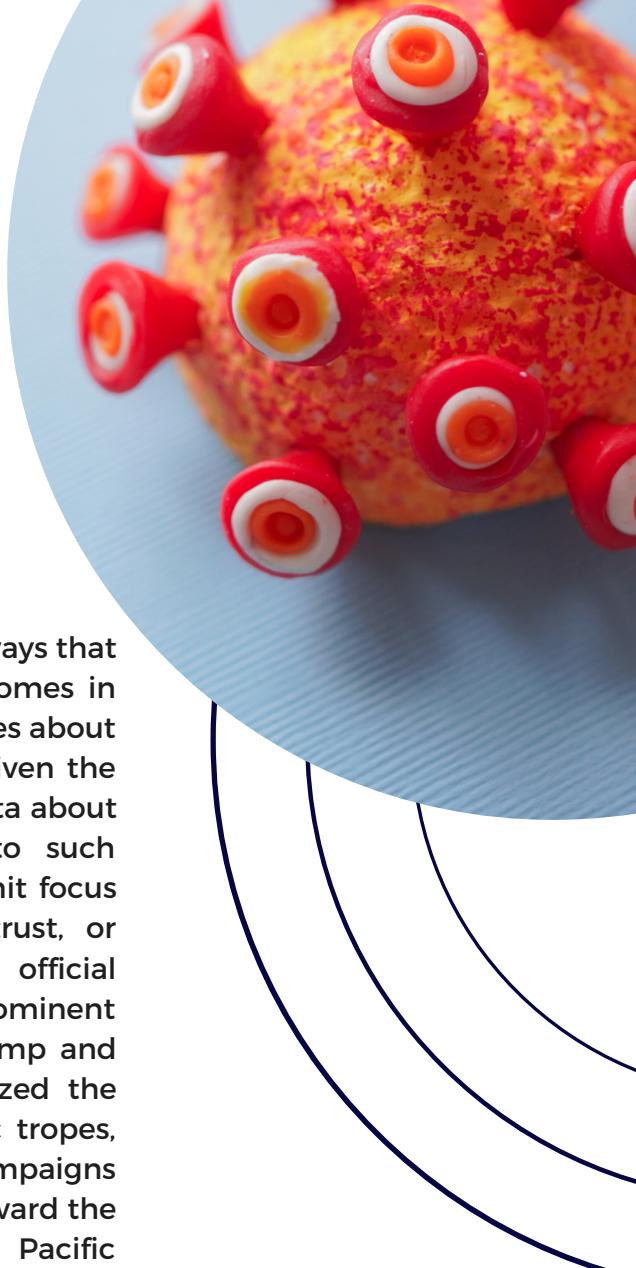
READINGS

Collins-Dexter, B. (2020, June 24). [*Canaries in the coal mine: COVID-19 misinformation and Black communities*](#). Technology and social change project. Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy.

Ong, J. C. (2021, February 4). [*The contagion of stigmatization: racism and discrimination in the “infodemic” moment, v1.0*](#). MediaWell, Social Science Research Council.

Soundararajan, T., Kumar, A., Nair, P., & Greely, J. (2020). [*Coronajihad: An analysis of Islamophobic COVID-19 hate speech and disinformation and its implications on content moderation and social media policy*](#). Equality Labs.

Noel, T. K. (2020). [*Conflating culture with COVID-19: Xenophobic repercussions of a global pandemic*](#). *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2(1), 1-7.





THINKING PAST “FAKE NEWS”

Studies of disinformation often assume that it takes the form of "fake news" and that it originates from extremist or foreign powers. This week unpacks these assumptions using two related, but conceptually distinct, topics. The first is the role of the US as a colonial power in spreading disinformation. Saranillio's book looks at US propaganda around Hawai'i statehood, while Snow, Taylor, and Bayoumi examine post-9/11 propaganda and its impact on Muslim communities. The second topic recognizes that disinformation takes many forms, including images, memes, videos, and trolling. Both cases acknowledge that strategic disinformation and its cousin "propaganda" are state and media industry practices with very long histories.

READINGS

- Snow, N., & Taylor, P. M. (2006). [The revival of the propaganda state: US propaganda at home and abroad since 9/11](#). *International Communication Gazette*, 68(5-6), 389-407.
- Bayoumi, M. (2015). [This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror](#). NYU Press.
- Saranillio, D. I. (2018). The propaganda of occupation: Statehood and the Cold War. In [Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood](#). Duke University Press, 131-170.
- Abidin, C. (2020). [Meme factory cultures and content pivoting in Singapore and Malaysia during COVID-19](#). *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(3).
- Krafft, P. M., & Donovan, J. (2020). [Disinformation by design: The use of evidence collages and platform filtering in a media manipulation campaign](#). *Political Communication*, 37(2), 194-214.
- Ong, J., & Cabañes, J. (2019). [When disinformation studies meets production studies: Social identities and moral justifications in the political trolling industry](#). *International Journal Of Communication*, 13(20), 5771-5790.
- Lewis, R. (2018). [Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube](#). Data & Society Research Institute, September 18.

THINKING PAST MEDIA LITERACY

A simplistic view of "media literacy" is frequently presented by pundits and tech companies as a panacea to issues around "fake news" and disinformation. Often, this view also places the responsibility on individuals to become better consumers of media. Putting aside the fact that most people engaging with disinformation have not been in a classroom for years, many creators and disseminators of false information think of themselves as critical thinkers, while conspiracy theorists urge others to "do their own research." How can we approach "media literacy" given the rest of this syllabus and widening epistemic differences?

READINGS

boyd, d. (2018, March 9). [You think you want media literacy... do you?](#)

SXSWEdu keynote. *Points: Data & Society blog*.

Bonus: [boyd's response to major criticisms of the talk](#)

Tripodi, F. (2018, May 16). [Searching for alternative facts: Analyzing](#)

[scriptural inference in conservative news practices](#). Data & Society

Research Institute.

Milner, R. & Phillips, W. (2021). [Cultivating ecological literacy](#). In *You are here: A field guide for navigating polarized speech, conspiracy theories and our polluted information landscape*. MIT Press, 149-180.

Marwick, A. & Partin, W. (2020, October 5). [QAnon shows that the age of alternative facts will not end with Trump](#). *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Fister, B. (2021, February 18). [The librarian war against Qanon](#). *The Atlantic*.

Scheibe, C. & Rogow, F. (2012). [The teacher's guide to media literacy: Critical thinking in a multimedia world](#). Corwin Press.



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ABOUT CITAP

The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) is a bold initiative at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill dedicated to researching, understanding, and responding to the growing impact of the internet, social media, and other forms of digital information sharing on democracy and the public sphere.

We have affiliate opportunities available for faculty and graduate students.

For more information, visit citap.unc.edu or [@unc_citap](https://twitter.com/unc_citap) on Twitter.

