

Faking the News

Tuesdays, 6:30 — 9:30 pm

NYU Interactive Telecommunications Program

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What this class is about

Lies. Hoaxes. Folk tales. Conspiracies. Rumors. Propaganda. Clickbait. The so-called “fake news” phenomenon is not new. But these days, misinformation seems to be a heightened concern—and it’s transforming politics, public opinion, and most people’s experience of the internet. In this 6 week class, we will creatively engage with the weird state of politics circa 2017. We will play with new media manipulation technologies to explore the frontiers of political expression online—like command-line tools for hacking video, new apps for image manipulation, the building blocks of the ad economy, autonomous Twitter bots, and the insidious next-generation of multimedia hoax tech.

Format & mid-term project

This class is an exercise in ethical research and fabrication. Over the 6 week course, participants will learn a mix of technical skills and concepts used by partisan hacks, propagandists, content farmers and trolls—good judgement is imperative!

Prior to each class session, participants will read 2 - 3 assigned articles that introduce background and important concepts. Each class session will be split between 1) a lecture / thematic discussion and 2) a technical workshop introducing tools and methods of the fake news economy.

Using these technologies, participants will complete weekly creative assignments and post them on a shared class blog. Each assignment will contribute to a progression of applicable concepts, which participants will draw on for a culminating “live fire” exercise: introducing a fake news story into the social media ecosystem. With great technological power comes great responsibility, so we’ll spend a fair bit of time getting clear on ethics and motivations for each project.

Courseware

For class readings and more details on assignments, refer to <http://itp.nyu.edu/fakingthenews/> (TBD). We’ll be using Slack to communicate and collaborate before, during and after the class. Email benjamin.moskowitz@nyu.edu if you need an invite.

Grading

75/100 and above is a passing grade. Weighting is as follows:

Assignments: 50 points — 5 assignments x 10 points each; submitted to class blog on time.

Attendance: 20 points — All sessions mandatory except with prior written approval.

Final presentation: 30 points — Well thought-out, clearly articulated summary

Schedule

Before class

Share an outlandish fake news story (or anecdote) you have personally encountered on the internet.

September 5th: Nobody Knows What's Going On

Discussion: We will share historical and international perspectives on “fake news,” and the fraying fabric of reality. Then, we’ll kick off the class with a look at how artists have used “fakes” as a way of critically engaging with the news, and get hands-on with some very powerful tools that exist for manipulating (and misleading with) video.

Reading:

- Read President Trump's Interview With TIME on Truth and Falsehoods
- This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook
- Viral WhatsApp Hoaxes Are India's Own Fake News Crisis
- The Myth of the Fourth Estate
- Can Facebook Fix Its Own Worst Bug?

Assignment: 1) Use public archives, transcripts and videogrep to put words in someone's mouth. 2) Brainstorm ideas for fake news project: what basic reality do you want to reflect?

September 12th: The Fake News Economy

Discussion: We'll examine the motivations of fake news peddlers, unpacking the incentives supporting the creation and dissemination of fake news. We'll set up an “official looking” Wordpress blog and also brainstorm ideas for final projects.

Reading:

- Inside a Fake News Sausage Factory: 'This Is All About Income'
- How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study
- Why BuzzFeed Doesn't Do Clickbait
- <https://www.fakeittomakeitgame.com/> (play)

Assignment: 1) Set up your own “official looking” WordPress blog + social tags to peddle questionable content. 2) Refine idea for fake news project: what basic reality do you want to mask and pervert?

September 19th: Conspiracy culture

Discussion: We'll take a brief tour of popular online conspiracy theories of the last decade, and how talk radio, the blogosphere and weird Twitter are creating a new political constituency. We'll also play with facial marionettes.

Reading:

- Meet Alex Jones
- Alex Jones Will Never Stop Being Alex Jones
- Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C.
- David Icke: Conspiracy of the Lizard Illuminati (watch)

Assignment: 1) Hatch a Photoshop hoax. 2) Finalize idea for fake news project: how will you mask the absence of a basic reality?

September 26th: Bot psychology

Discussion: We learn about how fake social media accounts can create or reinforce the illusion of public opinion. Participants will share progress on final projects.

Reading:

- Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary
- The Agency
- The Propaganda About Russian Propaganda
- Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections
- The Rise of Social Bots (selection)
- Bot or Not (activity)

Assignment: 1) Create a simple social bot to drive visitors to your Wordpress blog.

October 3rd: Next-generation

Discussion: We survey of the next generation of hoax tech: AI, photogrammetry, facial marionettes, and other scary frontiers—how can the world prepare? What responsibilities if any do platforms have to verify truth or halt the spread of fake news?

Reading:

- Radiolab: Breaking News (listen)
- Adobe Voco 'Photoshop-for-voice' causes concern
- AI Creates Fake Obama
- Algorithms Can Help Stomp Out Fake News
- Artificial intelligence is going to make it easier than ever to fake images and video
- Fake News is About to Get Even Scariest Than You Dreamed
- Google's "One True Answer" problem — when featured snippets go bad

Assignment: 1) Set up AdWords and optimize. Release your fake news story into the world.

October 10th: Presentations

We share and reflect on final projects, and think about next steps.

After class (TBD)

Potential ITP community event presenting the results of the live-fire exercise.