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| Course Syllabus: Social Science 2N03E |
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| Conspiracy Theories, Fake News, and Critical Investigation |
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McMaster University – Summer 2017

Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Room: LR Wilson 1055

Instructor: Mark Busser (bussermp@mcmaster.ca)
Office Hours: Mondays, 11 am – 12 noon in Kenneth Taylor Hall 230A

Course Description: An interdisciplinary examination through the lens of the Social Sciences of the role of hoaxes, myths, urban legends, and health scares in our contemporary social media landscape. Focuses on the development of the critical thinking and digital literacy skills needed to evaluate journalistic, academic, and alternative media sources.

Intended Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Distinguish between authentic news sources and satire, parody, manipulated, or imposter versions of those sources.
- Apply criteria to evaluate news sources (i.e. generally reliable vs. generally questionable outlets) and news content (i.e. strong vs. weak articles or reports).
- Understand various ideological or political party perspectives, and identify levels of slant or bias in particular outlets or articles.
- Recognize a number of common fallacies, cognitive biases, and errors in reasoning.
- Explain the essence of disagreement that underpin debates over social science issues such as climate change, vaccination programs, trust in government, historical revisionism, and
- Develop strategies for engaging constructively with friends, family, colleagues, or online contacts when disagreements about facts emerge.

Evaluation Components:

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| Class Attendance: | Physical Presence During Class Time | 10% |
| Class Participation: | Contributing to Discussions and Activities | 15% |
| Mid-Term: | Mid-Term Test on Early Course Materials | 25% |
| Research Paper: | Applying Critical Investigation to a Case Study | 25% |
| Exam: | Short Answer and Essay | 25% |

Key Course Materials:

- No Required Textbook Purchase
- Links, Videos, Readings and Multimedia Content, Made Available on *Avenue to Learn*
- Articles and copies of select chapters from books will be made available within the password-protected space of Avenue to Learn in a way that is in keeping with McMaster's Fair Dealing Policy and the Canadian Copyright Act. These materials may not be further distributed.

Assessment and Evaluation**(Further Details to Be Posted on Avenue)**Attendance (10%) and Participation (15%)

Attendance in class is required for this course, because it is designed in an active learning style. In addition to being present for the duration of class sessions, you are also asked to engage actively in discussion, conversation, group work, activities, and debates. Success will be evaluated by a holistic view of the overall pattern of engagement, so that nobody has to be perfect on everything. Please contact me if you need accommodation with either the pen-and-paper or interactive component of participatory exercises. The following types of exercises may factor into the participation element of the course:

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| In-Class and Online Discussion | Check-In Micro-Quizzes and Micro-Responses |
| Self-Evaluation | In-Class Group Work and Peer Assessment Exercises |
| Draft Assignment Submissions | Informal Mini-Presentations to Class (See Schedule) |

Mid-Term Test (25%)

A mid-term test will be held **In-Class on Tuesday, July 11th**. The location will be confirmed in advance. This test will cover some of the fundamental facts, concepts and approaches introduced in the early portion of our course. A test preparation guide explaining the test in detail will be distributed and discussed in class.

Research Report (25%)

The major paper for this course will be an independent research report with an original research component. (An assignment sheet explaining the major essay in detail will be distributed and discussed in class.) You will be asked to choose a controversy and explore its relevant issues and debates, choosing one to investigate through evidentiary research. This will require you to:

1. Apply concepts and approaches from our lectures and readings to your topic;
2. Conduct additional independent and original research using academic journals and books; and
3. Compose an original analytical argument related to the topic.

The essay will be due via Avenue to Learn on **Monday, July 24th by 11:59 pm**.

Final Exam (25%)

A final examination will be held during the final class session. An exam preparation guide will be distributed and discussed in class.

Early Term Feedback

I will work hard to make sure that 10% or more of assignments are graded and returned by the last day for cancelling classes without failure by default, which in **Spring Session 2 (2017)** is **Wednesday July 19th**. Please note that extensions, make-up assignments or late submissions can complicate this goal.

See: <https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/dates/2017ss/>

Course Schedule

The following schedule shows a breakdown of our class sessions. A reading list will be posted online on Avenue to Learn.

Session 1: Tuesday, June 20th

- Conspiracy Theory: Was There a Second Shooter at the Assassination of JFK?
- Introduction to Fake News
- Thinking Critically About Conspiracy Theories

Session 2: Thursday, June 22nd

- Conspiracy Theory: Did the United States Government Fake The Moon Landing?
- Fake News: Distinguishing Mistakes, Hoaxes, Clickbait, and Bull
- Critical Investigation Skill: Assessing Conditional Reasoning: If/Then Conditions

Session 3: Tuesday, June 27th

- Conspiracy Theory: Was Princess Diana the Victim of a Royal Plot?
- Fake News: The Role of Journalism
- Critical Investigation Skill: Evaluating Deductive Syllogisms and Generalizations

Session 4: Thursday, June 29th

- Conspiracy Theory: Do Governments and Pharma Companies Downplay Vaccination Risks?
- Fake News: Folk Numeracy, Health Scares and Junk Science
- Critical Investigation Skill: Interpreting Statistics and Trends, Relative vs. Absolute Risk
- **Participation Activity: Share Chosen Research Topic With Class ***

Session 5: Tuesday, July 4th

- Conspiracy Theory: Was 9/11 an Inside Job?
- Fake News: Evaluating Websites and Online Journalism
- Critical Investigation Skill: Identifying Common Fallacies

Session 6: Thursday, July 6th

- Conspiracy Theory: Are World Governments Hiding Evidence of Alien Contact?
- Fake News: Evaluating Visual Evidence
- Critical Investigation Skill: Recognizing Cognitive Biases

Session 7: Tuesday, July 11th

- **Midterm Test (In-Class)**

Session 8: Thursday, July 13th

- Conspiracy Theory: Is Climate Change a Hoax Perpetuated by Global Elites?
- Fake News: Identifying Trustworthy Experts and Authorities
- Critical Investigation Skill: Identifying the Locus of Disagreement in a Controversy

Session 9: Tuesday, July 18th

- Conspiracy Theory: Was Barack Obama Truly Born in the United States?
- Fake News: Dealing with Editorial Slant and Bias
- Critical Investigation Skill: Recognizing Ideological Arguments
- **Participation Activity: Share Printed Copy of Incomplete/Draft Research Report**

Session 10: Thursday, July 20th

- Conspiracy Theory: Does the Mainstream Media Purposefully Shape How We Think?
- Fake News: Filter Bubbles and the Echo Chamber Effect
- Critical Investigation Skill: Understanding Social Epistemology

Session 11: Tuesday, July 25th **(Research Paper Due: Monday, July 24th at 11:59 pm)**

- Conspiracy Theory: Did the U.S Government Conduct Unethical Experiments in Tuskegee?
- Fake News: Critically Examining Racialized Framing
- Critical Investigation Skill: Critically Assessing the Methods Used in Experiments

Session 12: Thursday, July 27th

- Conspiracy Theory: Why Is Holocaust Denial Considered a Form of Hate Speech?
- Fake News: Assessing Free Speech and Responsible Speech
- Critical Investigation Skill: Developing Strategies for Constructive Online Engagement
- **Participation Activity: One-Slide Research Report Presentation to Class ***

Session 13: Tuesday, August 1st

- Conspiracy Theory: Is There a Master Plot to Create a One-World Government?
- Fake News: Developing a Healthy and Rewarding Media Diet
- Critical Investigation Skill: Connecting and Synthesizing Multiple Skills

Session 14: Thursday, August 3rd

- **Final Exam (In-Class)**

Class Policies

Test and Exam Coverage

Reading is a key element of university education, and of this course. Students often ask which chapters they really have to read, and which they do not. All chapters are to be considered as preparation material for tests and exams, especially where the content is echoed during lecture. Test and exam questions should focus primarily on material echoed with overlap between both in the required readings and in the lectures. However, you are always welcome to show off independent reading by applying information and insights from other sections in order to deepen and elaborate your text and exam answers.

Citation Styles:

The two preferred citation styles for this course are the **American Psychological Association (APA)** style for in-text citations, or the **University of Chicago** style for footnotes. You may compose your reference lists and citations using either of these two citation styles in any given assignment.

Note on Source Integration (Paraphrasing, Citation and Quotation)

Using research sources in a sophisticated way is crucial to success in any upper-level course. To show academic integrity you must include citations in your work giving credit to your sources for any borrowed information, ideas or insights. In addition, please note that any time you use an author's wording or sentence structure, you **must put the borrowed phrasing in quotation marks**. You may use ellipses and/or square brackets to indicate any wording tweaks, deletions, or other editorial changes you make. When fully paraphrasing without quotation, be sure to compose your sentences **from scratch**. Several advanced strategies can let you quote and paraphrase in any combination you like. For example, you may (and should) choose to include part of a sentence in quotes while paraphrasing the rest from scratch. Please read this paragraph as many times as you need to, or perhaps tattoo it on your hand. Hand tattoos reminding students of citation rules will not be considered cheating at the exam.

Respect, Privacy and Intellectual Property Policy

Our course dynamic will mix in-class discussions and online discussions. Our shared goal will be to create a productive and academically stimulating space where people can share ideas, ask questions, and test out ideas. Disagreement is welcome, but all participants are expected to engage in a way that challenges and questions ideas rather than attacking the character, motives, or identity of individuals or groups in an *ad hominem* fashion. Our classroom group will also act as a community, which may need a chance to earn trust, develop a positive dynamic, and work through complexities. **Please do not capture video, create audio-recordings, or otherwise broadcast our lectures, class proceedings, or online material without the consent of the instructor and relevant participants.** Students needing accommodation for any reason can and should consult the instructor in order to discuss arrangements and expectations.

University Policies

Privacy Protection: In accordance with regulations set out by the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act, the University will not allow return of graded materials by placing them in boxes in departmental offices or classrooms so that students may retrieve their papers themselves; tests and assignments must be returned directly to the student. Similarly, grades for assignments for courses may only be posted using the last 5 digits of the student number as the identifying data. Arrangements for the return of assignments will be finalized during the first class. The following possibilities exist for return of graded materials:

1. Direct return of materials to students in class;
2. Return of materials to students during office hours;
3. Students provide a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return by mail;
4. Submit/grade/return papers electronically.

Academic Integrity: You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Originality Checking: In some assignments for this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal plagiarism. Digital work submitted via *Avenue to Learn* will be automatically submitted to Turnitin.com so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty, and so that the paper can be marked digitally using the service’s digital feedback system. Students who do not wish to submit their work to Turnitin.com have the right to arrange, with the instructor, an alternate submission method that bypasses Turnitin. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to: www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF) Course Policies:

About the MSAF: The MSAF is an on-line self-reporting tool for reporting missed academic work. The MSAF gives you the ability to request consideration for missed work (worth less than 25% of the final grade) due to illness, injury or personal issues lasting 3 days or less. You must use the tool on MOSAIC to report your absence. This form should be filled out as soon as possible after your absence. It is YOUR responsibility to **follow up with your instructor** immediately (within 48 hours of submitting the MSAF) in person or by email regarding the nature of the relief that may be possible for the missed work. Whether consideration is given for missed work, and the type of consideration provide, is the decision of the instructor.

MSAF Limitations: You may submit only 1 MSAF per term without supporting documentation. An MSAF cannot be used for any final examination.

Longer or Successive Absences: For absences longer than 3 days, for reasons other than illness or injury, or for missed work worth 25% or more of the course grade, you must visit the Faculty of Social Sciences office to request an MSAF exception link. You will be required to provide appropriate supporting documentation to the Faculty office before an exception link with be approved. You may also be required to meet with an academic advisor.

MSAF Privacy: You must not submit any medical or other relevant documentation to your instructor. Your instructor may not ask you for such documentation. You are not required to share the details of your medical or personal situation with any instructor.

MSAF Responsibilities: The purpose of the MSAF is to provide students who miss academic work because of illness, injury, or serious personal issues with the ability to still fulfill the requirements of the course. However, the MSAF is not intended as a time or workload management tool, or as a holiday organizer. As a student you are responsible for using the MSAF tool as it was intended, and to not misuse or abuse it for other reasons. Avoid problems by starting assignments and studying as early as possible.

MSAF Follow-Up E-Mail: In this course, in order to arrange for MSAF consideration, you must e-mail the instructor as soon as possible after submitting your MSAF form. Your message to the instructor should include the following information:

1. If the missed work was an assignment, explain the work that you had completed before your absence and any work you have completed following your absence.
2. Propose a new deadline to submit the assignment, or, for tests, identify blocks of time when you are available to complete the assignment outside of class time.
3. Your student number, McMaster email address, and (if applicable) TA information.

Important Note: In this class, MSAF problem-solving schemes will not typically drop missed work or re-weight assignments. Arrangements will be made so that missed work can be completed at the student's earliest possible convenience.

Academic Accommodations:**Student Accessibility Services (SAS):**

Students who require academic accommodations must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652, or by email at sas@mcmaster.ca. For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#).

Responsibilities as a Student Registered at SAS: SAS assists with academic and disability-related resources for students with a variety of learning needs. If you require academic accommodation through SAS, be sure that you arrange your accommodations with SAS as early as possible, and ensure that the instructor receives a copy of your accommodation letter as early as possible in the term.

Students registered with SAS are responsible for:

- meeting their SAS Program Coordinator prior to, or at the start of each academic term (September, January and summer sessions);
- providing their SAS Program Coordinator with relevant and professional medical or psychological documentation;
- notifying their SAS Program Coordinator if courses are dropped or added, or if accommodations require a change;
- meeting with individual course instructors to discuss their specific accommodation needs in relation to the course; and
- providing the instructor with their accommodation letter as early as possible.

For more information, visit the SAS website: <http://csd.mcmaster.ca/sswd/faqs.html>

Accommodating Peers: Students may be asked to assist in making our learning environment accessible for all students. For example, in-class presenters may be asked to submit, in advance, a text summary of the presentation's visual components to ensure the inclusion of students for whom those visuals would not otherwise be accessible.

Online and Electronic Course Components:

Avenue to Learn: In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn (“Avenue”) for the online components of the course. Students should be aware that when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation, may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

Digital Submissions: The written assignments in this course will be submitted via the digital Drop-Box function on Avenue to Learn, found under the Assessments tab. Many file types are compatible with the submission system, including Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, PostScript, Adobe Acrobat (.pdf), or Rich Text (.rtf) files. If your word processing program uses a file type not listed here, please contact the instructor to check compatibility.

Written Assignments: All written assignments are to be typed and double-spaced. Please include a title page with your name, student number and email address, the topic title of the assignment and the date submitted. Printed copies of assignments submitted through Avenue will not be necessary unless explicitly requested.

Submitting Assignments Electronically: Individual assignments submitted electronically must somehow include your last name in the filename, e.g.
Smith_Assignment_5_Article_Assessments.pdf or Khan – Annotated Bibliography.pdf

Late Submissions: Late submissions will be penalized at a rate of 5% of the assignment mark per calendar day (including weekends).

Faculty Of Social Sciences E-Mail Communication Policy: It is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including to TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student’s own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.

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The instructors and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.