**A History of Fake News - HIST-UA282**

Rosamund Johnston – [rj849@nyu.edu](mailto:rj849@nyu.edu)

What is news? What is fake news? And what can these concepts tell us about the societies that employ them? In this course, students will explore the varied social actors and media forms that have historically been linked with the dissemination of “the truth.” The class will consider when, and to what ends, different media have been utilized to confer a veneer of truth upon information its authors knew to be false. We will also examine historical modes of truth and falsehood assessment, asking who has historically been credited with the ability to discern fact from fiction. This class focuses primarily on European and North American examples of “fake news,” while in no way aiming to suggest that particular societies are more mendacious than others. Examples of media hoaxes, propaganda, misinformation, and spoofs will – additionally – form the basis of an introduction to source analysis offered by this course.

Students will write short, weekly response papers and deliver one 10-minute presentation in class on a syllabus topic of their choice. In addition, students will be graded on their class participation and a final project which explores a theme from the course in greater depth.

**Assignments:**

Class participation: 10%

Weekly response papers (1-2pp): 30%

In-class presentation (8-10 minutes): 15%

Plus a written accompaniment (2-4pp, counts as the response paper for the week of your presentation): 15%

Final project (10 p): 30%

**Academic integrity:** Always use your own words and attribute phrases, sentences, ideas and so on to their proper authors. Two lines copy-pasted are still plagiarized, unless put in quotation marks and footnoted. Any student who plagiarizes - to whatever extent - will fail the course and be reported. This is non-negotiable. For more information on NYU’s policy on this please consult: <http://cas.nyu.edu/page/ug.academicintegrity>. If you’re still unsure please contact me.

**For students with disabilities:** If you are student with a disability who is requesting accommodations, please contact New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu). You must be registered with CSD to receive accommodations. Information about the Moses Center can be found at [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

This classroom is intended to be a **safe zone** for individuals of all ethnicities, abilities, religions, sexual orientations, and gender identities. For NYU’s full diversity statement, which outlines this policy in more depth, please see <http://www.nyu.edu/life/diversity-nyu.html>.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

Assigned readings and primary sources appear on the day they are to be COMPLETED. The only exception is when a primary source will be distributed or viewed in class, which is indicated on the syllabus. All assigned readings and most primary sources will be available on NYU Classes.

**Week One: Who Can Tell the Truth – And How?**

**Tuesday (May 22)**:The News versus The Story

Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” in *Illuminations* (Schocken, 2007) pp. 83-111

Robert Darnton, “The True History of Fake News.” The New York Review of Books. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news/>

Elle Hunt, “What is Fake News?” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate>

Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 1996) pp. 31-57, 103-108

Rosa Salzberg, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice* (Manchester, 2014) pp. 18-39

Mitchell Stevens, *A History of the News* (Oxford, 2006) **(excerpts in class)**

**Thursday (May 24)**: Media Forms and Claims to Truth

Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War* (Palgrave, 2011) pp. 209-253

Alexandra Juhasz & Jesse Lerner, *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing* (Minnesota, 2006) pp. 1-36

Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave” in *On Photography* (Penguin, 1977) pp. 3-26

Louise Spence & Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (Rutgers, 2011) pp. 11-35

Primary Sources:

“News on the March” from Orson Welles (dir.) *Citizen Kane*. 1941 **(in class)**

Photos of Klement Gottwald & Vlado Clementis, with excerpt from Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Faber & Faber, 2007) **(in class)**

British and American examples of embedded journalism from Iraq **(in class)**

**Week Two:** **Who Can Tell Truth from Fiction?**

**Tuesday (May 29)**: New Media, New Media Scares

Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT, 1991) pp. 181-195

Joy Elizabeth Hayes & Kathleen Battles, “Exchange and Interconnection in US Network Radio: A Reinterpretation of the 1938 War of the Worlds Broadcast” in *Radio Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2011) pp. 51-62

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT, 1994) pp. 3-32

Primary Sources:

Gordon Allport & Hadley Cantril, *The Psychology of Radio* (Harper, 1935) pp. 3-36

Orson Welles (dir.) *The War of the Worlds*. 1938. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g>

**Thursday (May 31)**: Susceptible Audiences?

Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: Study of the Popular Mind* (Penguin, 1992) pp. 13-71

Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (California, 2009) pp. 1-21

Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (Knopf, 1973) pp. 6-32 & 88-109

Primary Sources:

John Frankenheimer (dir.) *The Manchurian Candidate*. 1962.

Excerpts from Radio Free Europe promotional film *Towers of Truth*. 1957**(in class)**

**Week Three: (Mostly) Early Modern Fake News**

**Tuesday (June 5)**:Print Culture & Pamphlets

Alison Games, “Violence on the Fringes: The Virginia (1622) and Amboyna (1623) Massacres” in *History*, Vol. 99, Issue 336 (July 2014) pp. 505-529

Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2006) pp. 4-26

Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice* (Oxford, 2007) pp. 157-199

Primary Sources:

Pamphlets about the Amboyna Massacre from <http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/nl/geheugen/view?coll=ngvn&maxperpage=36&page=2&query=amboina&identifier=KONB06%3A0050&pres%5Bimageindex%5D=48#top-bar> **(in class)**

“Strange Newes out of Kent” pamphlet from 1609 **(in class)**

**Thursday (June 7)**: Witchcraft & Denunciation

Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words:* *Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge, 1981) pp. 3-24

Elizabeth Horodowich, “Witchcraft and Rumour in Renaissance Venice,” in *Fama and her Sisters: Gossip and Rumour in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Claire Walker and Heather Kerr (Brepols, 2015), 65-83.

Michael Ostling, “Imagined Crimes, Real Victims: Hermeneutical Witches and Jews in Early Modern Poland” in Eugene M. Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, and Robert Weinberg (eds.) *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond: New Histories of an Old Accusation* (Indiana, 2017) pp. 18-38

Charles Zika*, The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Routledge, 2007) pp. 179-210

Primary Sources:

Printed materials about witchcraft in England from <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/specialcollections/virtualexhibitions/damnedart/england/> **(in class)**

**Week Four: Revolutions and Conspiracies**

**Tuesday (June 12)**:Revolutions

Peter Bradshaw, “Hallucinating History: When Stalin and Eisenstein Reinvented a Revolution.” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/24/october-revolution-stalin-sergei-eisenstein>

Frederick Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Cornell, 2004) pp. 1-45

Timothy Tackett, “Rumor and Revolution: The Case of the September Massacres” in *French History and Civilization*, Vol. 4 (2011) pp. 54-64\*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Michel-Rob Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Beacon Press, 1995) pp. 70-108

Primary Sources:

Sergei Eisenstein (dir.) *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928)

Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Grove, 1965) pp. 69-97

**Thursday (June 14)**: Conspiracies

Colin Dickey, “The New Paranoia.” The New Republic. <https://newrepublic.com/article/142977/new-paranoia-trump-election-turns-democrats-conspiracy-theorists>

Mark Feldstein, “Wallowing in Watergate: Historiography, Methodology, and Mythology in Journalism’s Celebrated Moment” in *American Journalism*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 2014) pp. 550-570

Claire Konkes & Libby Lester, “Incomplete Knowledge, Rumour and Truth Seeking: When Conspiracy Theories Become News” in *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 7 (2017) pp. 826-844

Primary Sources:

Peter Hyams (dir.) *Capricorn One* (1977)

Alan Pakula (dir.) *The Parallax View* (1974)

Alan Pakula (dir.) *All The President’s Men* (1976)

**Week Five: Wartime**

**Tuesday (June 19)**:World War One

Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War* (Palgrave, 2011) pp. 44-65

Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004) pp. 122-163

Guy Richard Hodgson, “Nurse, martyr, propaganda tool: The reporting of Edith Cavell in British Newspapers, 1915-1920” in *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (August 2017) pp. 239-253

Primary Sources:

Karl Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind* (Yale, 2015) **(in class)**

Geoffrey H. Malins (dir.), *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) **(in class)**

Posters from the Library of Congress’s World War I Collection Online: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/> **(in class)**

**Thursday (June 21)**: World War Two

Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War* (Palgrave, 2011) pp. 66-95

Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Manchester UP, 2011)

Kristopher Imbrigotta, “History and the Challenge of Photography in Bertold Brecht’s Kriegsfibel” in *Radical History Review*, No. 106 (Winter 2010) pp. 27-45

Primary Sources:

Kurt Gerron & Karel Pečený (dirs.) *Theresienstadt (The Fuehrer Gifts the Jews a City)*. 1944

Joseph Goebbels, “Knowledge and Propaganda.” Calvin College German Propaganda Archive. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb54.htm>

Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power.” Calvin College German Propaganda Archive. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb56.htm>

Bertold Brecht, Excerpts from *War Primer* (Verso, 2017)**(in class)**

British Ministry of Food Films **(in class)**

**Week Six: From the Cold War to Post-Truth**

**Tuesday (June 26)**:The Cold War

Maria Do Carmo Picarra, “Empire Cinema: Propaganda and Censorship in Colonial Films during the Portuguese Estado Novo” in *Journal of African Cinemas* Vol. 8, No. 3 (2016) pp. 283-297

Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of The Mass Media* (Pantheon, 2002) pp. 143-169

Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies: The Battle over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (Oxford UP, 2017) pp. ix-xxii, 60-87

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin, 2005) pp. 99-113

Primary Sources:

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” in *The Orwell Reader* (Harcourt Brace, 1956) pp. 355-366

George Orwell, “The Principles of Newspeak.” Appendix of 1984. <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/1984/english/en_app>

*Future Imperative*, Czechoslovak Radio Docu-Drama. 1959 **(in class)**

**Thursday (June 28)**: End of History, End of Truth?

Patryk Babiracki, “Why Americans Keep Falling for Russian Propaganda.” *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/09/13/why-americans-keep-falling-for-russian-propaganda/?utm_term=.7f43b7872550>

Nick Davis, *Flat Earth News* (Random House, 2009) pp. 9-28 & 49-73

Ben Goldacre, *Bad Science* (Harper, 2009) pp. 224-241

Jonathan Hopkin & Ben Rosamond, “Post-Truth Politics, Bullshit and Bad Ideas: ‘Deficit Fetishism’ in the UK” in *New Political Economy* (September 14, 2017) pp. 1-15

Peter Pomerantsev, “Disinformation and the Decay of Nations.” *The American Interest.* <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/20/disinformation-decay-nations/>

Primary Sources:

Barry Levinson (dir.) *Wag the Dog* (1997)

Pope Francis, “Fake News and Journalism for Peace,” January 24, 2018. <http://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/fake-news-and-journalism-for-peace/> **(in class)**

1. \* Translations of the quotations in French will be provided on NYU Classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)