What Should I Believe and Why?
Navigating Our World Through Fake News, Outsourcing Information, and Disagreement

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Instructor

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Course Overview

Today's world is filled with information, and oftentimes an *overload* of information, leaving us wondering, what should we believe? This course is a practically oriented philosophy course which looks at common sources of information and asks students to reflect on whether these sources are unreliable or problematic in some way when it comes to learning, attaining knowledge, and growing in understanding.

This course will involve both reading assignments as well as 'engagement' assignments, which will require students to go out into the world to evaluate, apply, or reflect on the views they have learned in class. For instance, students may be asked to have a conversation with someone whom they trust and believe what they say on a particular issue and write a reflection on why they are quick to believe what that person says. Students may be asked to identify news articles on their social media and evaluate what counts as 'fake news' or not.

This course will run for three weeks, whereby each week will be centered around one main question. The three questions of this course are:

1) How, if at all, should disagreement among informed individuals about a particular issue matter in my forming/revising opinions?
2) How, if at all, should I read the news?
3) What information, if any, should I 'outsource' to the internet or others in my community, and what (if anything) should I try to appreciate for myself? When I do outsource, what sources do I select and why do I trust them?

Course Materials

All required readings will be posted for students on Canvas. Student should have reliable access to the internet and will need to be accessing Canvas at least 3 days (ideally 5) each week.

Course Schedule

Week 1		Disagreement
Readings	(i) (ii)	"Reasonable Religious Disagreements" Feldman (2007) Selections from *On Liberty*, Mill "The Dying Art of Disagreement" Stephens (2017)
Discussion Questions	(i)	Do you think all kinds of disagreement are valuable for democracy, as Mill suggests? Try to think up of a case where disagreement might be harmful that Mill might have overlooked.
	(ii)	If there is a lack of consensus among scientists about a particular scientific issue, do you think you should refrain from believing one way or the other? Why or why not? Since there is a lack of consensus among religious experts about what religion is correct (and whether God exists at all), do you think you should refrain from believing one way or the other? Why or why not? Due on Canvas by <u>Wednesday, June 29 @11:59pm EST</u>
Engagement Activity		Identify one belief (religious, political, moral, scientific, etc.) you hold that you are confident about. Then, find someone who holds the opposing view and set up a 15-minute meeting with them. Hear their side. If you feel comfortable, try arguing respectfully with them. Did this conversation influence your beliefs or understanding at all? Do you feel more or less confident about your belief after this conversation? Write a 1-page reflection paper on your conversation and any important observations you took away from this experience. Reflection paper is due on Canvas by <u>Thursday, June 30 @11:59pm</u>
Synchronous Live Discussion *OR* **Response Post**		Choose <u>one</u> of the following two options: 1) Attendance and participation in a synchronous discussion over Zoom on **Saturday**, July 2nd, at 10:00am EST, where students will discuss and ask follow-up questions to previous students' postings on the discussion board, material covered in the readings, as well to sharing their own experiences and reflections from the engagement activity. 2) Respond to at least *two* your classmates' posts on the Discussion Board. Responses shouldn't just state that you agree with what was said, but consist of i) raising an objection, ii) raising questions, iii) drawing out a further implication of what was said, iv) connecting what was said to other course material, etc. These response posts are due by **Saturday,** July 2nd at 11:59pm CST.

Course Schedule

Week 2	Fake News
Readings/Podcast/Video	(i) "Fake News, False Beliefs, and the Need for Truth in Journalism" Quinn (2017) (ii) "Why Do People Fall for Fake News?" Pennycook & Rand (2019) (iii) Podcast: <u>The Other Mr. President, Act 3</u>: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/763/the-other-mr-president (iv) Excerpt on Fact-Checking (v) <u>The Truman Show</u> – Official Teaser Movie Clip
Discussion Questions	(i) Do you think reporters should play a 'gatekeeping' role for the general public, only reporting on what they have good evidence to take to be true? Or is it acceptable for reporters to also put forth unverified information to let the public decide for themselves? In the case of the putting out Trump's Russia Dossier, do you think *Buzzfeed News* did the right thing, or would you side with the decisions made by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*? Why? Explain your answers. (ii) In a world full of fake news and even governmental propaganda, how do you think we can we best go about discerning truth from falsity? Do you think those in, say, Russia, can escape a world where everything seems to be propaganda? How do we ensure that we don't end up like Truman? Due on Canvas by <u>Wednesday, July 6th @11:59pm EST</u>
Engagement Activity	Scroll through your Facebook (or Twitter, WeChat) feed – or even just your Google/Apple news feed – and identify the first 5 news or reporting links that you see. (i) Say which you think are probably true vs. not from a credible source (fake news), and then, (ii) Do some independent digging for corroboration, using a search engine outside your filter bubble (such as duckduckgo.com), and report on the actual results. Write a 1-page reflection paper which includes both (i) and (ii). Reflection paper is due by <u>Thursday, July 7th @11:59pm EST</u>
Synchronous Live Discussion *OR*	Choose <u>one</u> of the following two options: 1) Attendance and participation in a synchronous discussion over Zoom on **Friday**, July 8th, at 10:00am EST, where students will discuss and ask follow-up questions to previous students' postings on the

Response Post	discussion board, material covered in the readings, as well to sharing their own experiences and reflections from the engagement activity.
	2) Respond to at least *two* your classmates' posts on the Discussion Board. Responses shouldn't just state that you agree with what was said, but consist of i) raising an objection, ii) raising questions, iii) drawing out a further implication of what was said, iv) connecting what was said to other course material, etc. These response posts are due by **Friday,** July 8th at 11:59pm CST.
Week 3	**Outsourcing Information**
Readings	(i) Ch. 8 – "Understanding and the Digital Human", from Lynch (2016) The Internet of Us (ii) Selections from Howell (2014) "Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference"
Discussion Questions	(i) Do you agree with Lynch's argument that the internet/googling has led to a decrease of understanding? Why or why not? (ii) Do you think that mentors, parents, or friends are different from the internet or google when it comes to gathering moral knowledge? Do you think it is less or more problematic to defer to one of these sources (versus the other)? If so, why? If not, why not? Due on Canvas by Wednesday, July 13 @11:59pm EST
Engagement Activity	Pick a day this week and commit to not getting any information from a digital device. (Personal communication like texts and calls is fine; Googling, perusing social media sites, and checking your phone for the weather, or a map, or the news is not.) You may need to do some research in advance of this day and write things down. (Is there a recipe or a set of directions you'll need?) You might want to make a temporary sign-off post on social media. You may also be interested in installing a "digital detox" app like Off the Grid, which completely blocks your phone for a length of time you determine. Each time you encounter a situation in which your instinct is to look something up on your phone, make a note. At the end of the day, reflect on those situations, how you handled them without being able to look something up, and whether it's important to be less generally dependent on web-based sources of information. .Put your reflections into a 1-page reflection paper. Reflection paper is due by Thursday, July 13 @11:59pm
Synchronous Live Discussion	Choose one of the following two options:

Course Schedule

OR **Response Post**	1) Attendance and participation in a synchronous discussion over Zoom on **Friday**, July 15th, at 10:00am EST, where students will discuss and ask follow-up questions to previous students' postings on the discussion board, material covered in the readings, as well to sharing their own experiences and reflections from the engagement activity. 2) Respond to at least *two* your classmates' posts on the Discussion Board. Responses shouldn't just state that you agree with what was said, but consist of i) raising an objection, ii) raising questions, iii) drawing out a further implication of what was said, iv) connecting what was said to other course material, etc. These response posts are due by **Friday,** July 15th at 11:59pm CST.

Grading Policy

Because this course is an Exploration Course, it is a noncredit course. Noncredit courses do not issue a traditional letter grade (A, B, C, D, F). Instead, students will receive an "L" for successful completion/audit or a "Z" for unsuccessful completion/audit. Students are evaluated based on engagement in Canvas, completion of assignments by deadlines, quality of work produced, as well as their ability to adhere to academic integrity standards and program policies.

In order to earn an "L", students will have to earn a 75% or higher, averaged across all assignments.

The three categories of assignments that you will be graded on are:

1) Initial Discussion Board Posts: 30% of grade
2) Reflection Papers: 40% of grade
3) Participation in Synchronous Zoom Discussion/Response Posts: 30% of grade

*Some material for this syllabus was adapted from Laura Callahan's Sample Syllabus for the course, *Epistemology in Practice: Skepticism, Fake News, and the Ethics of Belief.*