

Phil 140: Knowledge and Society: Epistemological Questions about the Internet (online)

Summer Semester 2, 2022, UNC Chapel Hill

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Course Description

Many of our beliefs are formed in response to information that we find online. But not all online sources are necessarily trustworthy — we often hear about the problem of fake news and online conspiracy theories in the post-truth era. This course will examine some of these problems in more detail. We will ask questions such as: What is bullshit? How should we combat fake news? How could you know if a conspiracy theory is actually true? Which kinds of sources should we expose ourselves to? How should I react when I learn that others disagree with me? This course aims to give you the tools and background to engage with these and similar questions in a more systematic way.

Course Goals

This course has two goals: (1) It aims to help students acquire the necessary basic skills to identify arguments in philosophy papers and to critically evaluate those arguments. (2) It aims to provide students with key philosophical concepts that relate to knowledge, evidence and rationality so that they can apply them to think more critically and systematically about the way they and others form beliefs about a variety of topics in their daily lives.

Readings

All readings will be made available on Sakai.

Course Requirements and Grading Policy

Attendance: 5%
Weekly Quizzes: 15%
Argument Reconstruction: 5%
First Short Paper: 15%
Second Short Paper: 20%
Special Participation: 20%
Final Exam: 20%

Assignments

Attendance:

Attendance at lectures is required as part of UNC's policy (see also the appendix at the end of the syllabus). But it is especially important during this course for two reasons: (1) The ideas we are discussing are often fairly difficult and so it's important that you come to lecture to make sure that you are understanding the readings accurately. (2) A large component of this course is for you to share your ideas and perspective with others — but if you don't come to class or don't participate, others will miss out on hearing your thoughts! To make sure that your incentives align with UNC's attendance policy, attendance will contribute 5% to your overall grade.

Quizzes:

I want to make sure that everyone is following along with the material we're discussing in class. So in order to make sure that everyone is on the same page, I will ask you to complete 5 quizzes on Sakai at the end of every week. These quizzes will usually be short and aim to test your understanding of the material of that week. The quizzes will make up 15% of your overall grade. The quizzes will be due on Sundays at 11.59pm.

Argument Reconstruction

It is important to be able to understand how an author argues for a conclusion before we can critically evaluate their argument. This is why you are required to submit a short argument reconstruction before submitting your first paper. This argument reconstruction will be roughly 1 page in length and will be worth 5% of your overall grade.

Short Papers

Twice during the semester you will be required to write a short paper on one of the readings that we have done up until now. In these papers you will explain an important idea from the readings that you disagree with, explain the author's reasons for adopting the idea and critically engage with it by coming up with objections. This will force you to think more deeply about why the author's view on a particular topic is wrong and yours might be right. The short papers will typically be around 3 pages long and should be submitted on the days indicated on the syllabus. I will distribute prompts for them one week in advance. The first paper will be worth 15% of your overall grade and the second paper will be worth 20% of your overall grade.

Final Exam

There is evidence that studying for a final exam improves long-term retention of the material covered on the exam. This is why we will have a final exam that covers all the material we have studied over the course of the semester. It will consist of short

answer questions that are designed to test your understanding of the main points discussed in the course. I will distribute a list of questions beforehand that you can use to prepare for the exam — the questions on the final exam will be a subset of those questions. The final exam is worth 20% of your overall grade.

Special Participation

The issues discussed in this class are relevant to all of our lives and I think it is important that throughout the course everyone is able to share their perspective. This is why four times throughout the semester you will be required to take on a leading role in the group discussions of the small study group to which I will assign you at the beginning of the semester. This means that you should (i) think of questions to discuss about a particular paper beforehand and send them to me before the day that the reading is due, (ii) manage the discussion of your group during that day, and (iii) write a short reflection indicating how the topics discussed in class that day relate to your own experience. The questions and reflection together should add up to roughly 1 page of writing. Each instance of your special participation assignment will be worth 5% of your overall grade. I will distribute more information about this assignment and who is in your group at the beginning of the semester.

Note: The argument reconstruction, short papers and special participation exercises will exceed 10 pages of writing.

Zoom etiquette

It is more difficult to have an open and constructive discussion on zoom than it would be in person. But it is even more difficult if everyone turns off their cameras — this way other students (and the instructor!) will feel less like they're discussing ideas with others and more like they are speaking to a vast and unsympathetic void. This is why you should try to keep your cameras turned on during our class. If there is a reason why you would prefer to keep your camera turned off during class, please reach out to me in an email.

Late Policy

I am usually happy to grant **short** extensions for the two short papers, argument reconstruction, the special participation reflection or the quizzes as long as you send me an email beforehand. If you should suffer a serious and genuinely unforeseen medical or personal emergency and need a longer extension, that emergency has to be verified with the Dean of Students Office (<https://deanofstudents.unc.edu/>) first. If an assignment is more than two days late it will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is late, unless you were experiencing a serious and genuinely unforeseen medical or personal emergency, and only when the emergency can be verified with the Dean of Students Office.

Note: The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Course Schedule:

Week 1 — Bullshit

Monday, June 20th - Introduction

Tuesday, June 21st - Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit”

Wednesday, June 22nd - Hans Maes and Katerin Schaubroeck, “Different Kinds and Aspects of Bullshit”

Thursday, June 23rd - Kenneth A. Taylor, “Bullshit and the Foibles of the Human Mind, or what the Masters of the Dark Arts Know”

Friday, June 24th - Heather Douglas, “Bullshit at the Interface of Science and Policy: Global Warming, Toxic Substances, and Other Pesky Problems”

Week 2 — Conspiracy Theories

Monday, June 27th - How to write a Philosophy Paper
Argument reconstruction due.

Tuesday, June 28th - M. Dentith, “Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence”

Wednesday, June 29th - Susan Feldman, “Counterfact Conspiracy Theories.”

Thursday, June 30th - Katherine Hawley, “Conspiracy theories, impostor syndrome, and distrust”

Friday, July 1st - M. Giulia Napolitano, “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation”
Paper 1 due.

Week 3 - Fake News

Monday, July 4th - No classes

Tuesday, July 5th - Nikil Mukerji, “What Is Fake News?”

Wednesday, July 6th - Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

Thursday, July 7th - Chris Blake-Turner, “Fake news, relevant alternatives, and the degradation of our epistemic environment”

Friday, July 8th - Elizabeth Stewart, “Detecting Fake News: Two Problems for Content Moderation”

Week 4 - Echo Chambers and Belief Polarization

Monday, July 11th - C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"

Tuesday, July 12th - Yuval Avnur, "What's Wrong with the Online Echo Chamber: A Motivated Reasoning Account"

Wednesday, July 13th - Alex Worsnip, "The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media"

Thursday, July 14th - Carrie Figdor, "Trust Me: News, Credibility Deficits, and Balance"

Friday, July 15th - Hrishikesh Joshi, "What are the Chances You're Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship"

Paper 2 due.

Week 5 - Disagreement and Irrelevant Influences on Belief

Monday, July 18th - G.A. Cohen, "Paradoxes of Conviction"

Tuesday, July 19th - Katia Vavova, "Irrelevant Influences"

Wednesday, July 20th - Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements"

Thursday, July 21th - David Christensen, "Disagreement and Public Controversy"

Friday, July 22th - Reading Day

Week 6 - Final Exam

Monday, July 25th — Final Exam

Tuesday, July 26th — Final Exam