**Intuitions of truth and the acceptance and**

**correction of misinformation**

**Psych 612 Advanced Seminar in Social Psychology -- Fall 2016**

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***Draft syllabus; all details pending***

***Topics and readings will be posted on Blackboard as we move along***

**What is this class about?**

People believe a lot of nonsense, from faulty health beliefs to erroneous personal memories, false product claims, and claims made during election campaigns. Correcting misinformation is very difficult and often inefficient. Worse, correction attempts sometimes backfire and convince people all the more that the false information is true. Behavioral research on these issues is scattered across many fields, from cognitive and social psychology to communication, journalism, political science, and public health. This class asks what has been learned and what to do about it.

The approach we take focuses on the basic psychological processes underlying judgments of truth: What makes us think something is or is not true? We first review basic research on intuitions of truth to provide a heuristic framework for the subsequent sections. For an overview on intuitions of truth see Schwarz, Newman, & Leach (in press) below.

Next, we review other approaches to the correction of misinformation, drawing mostly on psychological research. For an overview of the themes of this section, see Lewandowsky et al. (2012) below.

From there, we turn to applied areas, from fact checking in journalism and politics to health education campaigns, consumer education, and corporate reputation management. To what extent do the basic principles developed earlier provide a coherent conceptualization of the available findings? Do the findings in these fields challenge the heuristic principles? Which gaps need to be filled? Which new insights emerge? And what does it all mean for the design of successful correction strategies and the psychology of assessing truth?

This is work in progress and the syllabus will keep changing as we move along. Note also that this is a research oriented class, more concerned with developing the right questions to guide future work than with conveying established facts.

We will also have some outside experts as guests when we discuss their work, enforcing some additional flexibility on the syllabus to make it work with their schedules. So bear with me as this class develops.

To give you a better sense of some of the topics covered, you may want to look at these overviews:

[**Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (in press). Making the truth stick and the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science and Policy.***](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295478583_Making_The_Truth_Stick_and_The_Myths_Fade_Lessons_from_Cognitive_Psychology)

Erroneous beliefs are difficult to correct. Worse, popular correction strategies may backfire and further increase the spread and acceptance of misinformation. People evaluate the truth of a statement by assessing its compatibility with other things they believe, its internal consistency, amount of supporting evidence, acceptance by others, and the credibility of the source. To do so, they can draw on relevant details (an effortful analytic strategy) or attend to the subjective experience of processing fluency (a less effortful intuitive strategy). Throughout, fluent processing facilitates acceptance of the statement – when thoughts flow smoothly, people nod along. Correction strategies that make false information more fluent (e.g., through repetition or pictures) can therefore increase its later acceptance. We review recent research and offer recommendations for more effective correction strategies.

[**Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., Seifert, C., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13,* 106-131.-- DOI 10.1177/1529100612451018**](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258180567_Misinformation_and_Its_Correction_Continued_Influence_and_Successful_Debiasing)

The widespread prevalence and persistence of misinformation in contemporary societies, such as the false belief that there is a link between childhood vaccinations and autism, is a matter of public concern. For example, the myths surrounding vaccinations, which prompted some parents to withhold immunization from their children, have led to a marked increase in vaccine-preventable disease, as well as unnecessary public expenditure on research and public-information campaigns aimed at rectifying the situation. We first examine the mechanisms by which such misinformation is disseminated in society, both inadvertently and purposely. Misinformation can originate from rumors but also from works of fiction, governments and politicians, and vested interests. Moreover, changes in the media landscape, including the arrival of the Internet, have fundamentally influenced the ways in which information is communicated and misinformation is spread. We next move to misinformation at the level of the individual, and review the cognitive factors that often render misinformation resistant to correction. We consider how people assess the truth of statements and what makes people believe certain things but not others. We look at people’s memory for misinformation and answer the questions of why retractions of misinformation are so ineffective in memory updating and why efforts to retract misinformation can even backfire and, ironically, increase misbelief. Though ideology and personal worldviews can be major obstacles for debiasing, there nonetheless are a number of effective techniques for reducing the impact of misinformation, and we pay special attention to these factors that aid in debiasing. We conclude by providing specific recommendations for the debunking of misinformation. These recommendations pertain to the ways in which corrections should be designed, structured, and applied in order to maximize their impact. Grounded in cognitive psychological theory, these recommendations may help practitioners—including journalists, health professionals, educators, and science communicators—design effective misinformation retractions, educational tools, and public-information campaigns.

[**Schwarz, N., Sanna, L., Skurnik, I., & Yoon, C. (2007). Metacognitive experiences and the intricacies of setting people straight: Implications for debiasing and public information campaigns. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 39,* 127-161*.***](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242124604_Metacognitive_Experiences_and_the_Intricacies_of_Setting_People_Straight_Implications_for_Debiasing_and_Public_Information_Campaigns)

This piece covers some of the same ground and also discusses debiasing strategies in decision making.

**Format**

Following an initial overview lecture, much of this will be discussion based. Expect to make a couple presentations over the course of the semester, which you can wrap into a term paper that should take the form of a research proposal.

**Grading**

Grading will be based on the proposal, the presentations, and discussion participation.