PSYC 612- F 2021 Seminar in Advanced Social Psychology

Mind & Society: Perspectives on Misinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Science Denial

<Updated versions can be accessed at http://tiny.cc/PSYC612-F21>

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Time & location

Thu, 2-6pm, Leavey Library, room 13

Please note the change in day and location!

Content

We will use theories of cognitive and social psychology to shed light on some pressing issues at the interface of mind and society: What underlies the acceptance and sharing of misinformation? What drives conspiracy theories and science denial? And what can we do about it, at the individual, social, and societal level? To address these issues we will draw on basic research in different areas, including motivated cognition, mental construal, metacognition, social trust, and social identity.

This document lists exemplary issues along with some (linked) readings to allow you an informed decision whether this class is of interest to you. The syllabus is a work in progress. It will live on Blackboard and will change in response to students' interests and emerging topics as we move along.

Students from neighboring fields (e.g., communication, journalism, political science, sociology) are welcome.

Workload

There will be weekly readings for all participants. You will also be expected to make several short presentations of selected papers over the course of the semester (which may be group presentations or individual presentations). Finally, there's a term paper that takes the form of a research proposal (no more than 10 pages), which can grow out of your presentations.

Select themes & readings

Open-access book

We'll only use a few chapters from this book. But thanks to open access funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation *The Psychology of Fake News* is available for free as a pdf from the publisher or a Kindle edition from Amazon, so you may as well download the volume.

Book

The Psychology of Fake News

Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation

Edited By Rainer Greifeneder, Mariela E. Jaffé, Eryn J. Newman, Norbert Schwarz

Edition	1st Edition
First Published	2020
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OPEN ACCESS
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[Pdf from the publisher ($0)](#)

[Kindle edition from Amazon ($0)](#)

Weird ideas and their popularity

We begin by familiarizing ourselves with the key misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories of our time, focusing on three examples: misinformation about covid; climate change denial; and QAnon. The readings for this section will include newspaper reports, videos, and survey results.

- Misinformation online: "The Web of False Information: Rumors, Fake News, Hoaxes, Clickbait, and Various Other Shenanigans"
  https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3309699?casa_token=DuHvL_6m-i4AAAAA:GjMtiQ7F
  ldjXpZw-LdNYXhs6W2fGXIHfGUpm7en-LpQLF8l9UeEQzQ0QeFM8fmhmJjLcXAFamzN
  pEQ

- QAnon
  https://video.vice.com/en_us/topic/qanon

  https://networkcontagion.us/reports/the-qanon-conspiracy-destroying-families-dividing-co
  mmunities-undermining-democracy/

- Covid-19
  https://networkcontagion.us/reports/a-contagion-of-institutional-distrust/

  https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-10103-x

Naive realism: The world is the way I see it (and if you don't agree, you're wrong and evil)

How we see the world and our own place in it is subject to numerous contextual influences. We nevertheless experience our own construals as real – the world is the way I see it and if you see it otherwise, you're probably wrong -- and perhaps evil! We review the processes underlying this "naïve realism" and discuss their implications.

- Naive realism

  Ross, L. & Ward, A. (1996). Naïve realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding. In E. S. Reed, E. Turiel, & T. Brown (eds.), *Values and knowledge*. New York: Psychology Press. [pdf]

- Blindspot bias

  Pronin, E. (2007). Perception and misperception of bias in human judgment. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(1), 37-43.

Perspectives on gullibility

We discuss different perspectives on gullibility and relate them to the acceptance of (misleading) information.

- Analytic and intuitive processing

  Schwarz, N. & Jalbert, M. C. (2021). When fake news feels true. Intuitions of truth and the acceptance and correction of misinformation. In R. Greifeneder, M. Jaffé, E.J. Newman, & N. Schwarz, N. (Eds.), *The psychology of fake news: Accepting, sharing, and correcting misinformation* (pp. 73-90). London, UK: Routledge/ Psychology Press.Metacognition [pdf]

- Cultural fluency

  Oyserman, D. (2019). Cultural Fluency, mindlessness, and gullibility. In R. Baumeister & J. Forgas (eds.), The social psychology of gullibility: Conspiracy theories, fake news, and irrational beliefs. New York: Routledge. [pdf]

- Trust and distrust

  Mayo, Ruth. "The skeptical (ungullible) mindset." In R. Baumeister & J. Forgas (eds.), The social psychology of gullibility: Conspiracy theories, fake news, and irrational beliefs. New York: Routledge. [pdf]

- Open and closed-mindedness

  Ottati, V., & Wilson, C. (2018). Open-minded cognition and political thought. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.[pdf]

- Social identity and group processes

  Kahan, D. M. (2017). *Misconceptions, misinformation, and the logic of identity-protective cognition.* Yale Law School: Working paper #164. [pdf]

Correcting misinformation

There is a sizeable literature on the correction of misinformation across many areas of the behavioral sciences, from processes involved in debiasing to belief updating and media literacy. There are also numerous content-specific treatments of misinformation about vaccines, covid, and climate change. The volume of that work increases rapidly, although conceptual progress is slower.

- Cognitive psychology & correction procedures

  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 [pdf]

  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. [pdf]

- The "Debunking Handbook" provides practical advice based on the literature reviewed in the preceding pieces.

  The Debunking Handbook 2020 [download]

- Media literacy approaches

  https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/media-literacy-fundamentals

- Gamification of media literacy

Conspiracy theories

The transitions between "normal" and "conspirational" thinking are fluent. A good starting point is:

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*, 3-35. [pdf]

Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *17*(2), 202-227. [pdf]

Conspiracy theories are immune to falsification but when their predictions fail, believers may eventually change their minds -- or not. Festinger et al's classic study is still the best piece on how believers deal with falsification.

Festinger, L., Riecken, H., & Schachter, S. (2017). *When prophecy fails: A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world*. Lulu Press, Inc. [pdf]