Misinformation and Democracy: Past and Present

POLISCI 235C

Fall 2023   Avshalom Schwartz
Mondays, 10:30am-1:20pm   Encina West, Room 401
Room: STLC 104   OH: By appointment

Course Description

Many today consider misinformation to be one of the most significant challenges faced by democratic societies. Some see this as a new phenomenon, arguing, for example, that modern technology—and, above all, social media giants like Facebook or Twitter—is responsible for this threat. Yet, the problem of misinformation and the challenges posed by 'fake news,' conspiracy theories, and lying in politics have a long history. In this course, we will ask whether and how misinformation threatens democracy and explore different potential solutions to this challenge. We will read various historical texts suggesting that misinformation is not a new phenomenon born in our digital age. Moreover, we will explore broader questions and issues around the topic of misinformation and democracy. We will ask whether democracies are particularly good at processing information or rather susceptible to mis/disinformation. We will further broaden the scope of misinformation to include discussions of the permissibility of lying in politics in antiquity, conspiracies during the late Roman Republic, and early modern debates about censorship and freedom of speech. We will see how several key figures in the history of political thought - from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes and Mill - sought to deal with these problems. Combining close readings of historical texts with discussions of contemporary research, we will ask whether and how we might be able to utilize historical knowledge and experience to understand and address some of the most pressing challenges we face today.

Course Mechanics

Students will be evaluated on the basis of active participation in seminar discussion throughout the course (20%), leadership of one class discussion (15%), an interpretive response paper on the class leadership topic (~5 pages) (15%), and a research paper (~10 pages/2500-3000 words) (50%). More information on each of these components is available on the course's Canvas site.

The Honor Code and Plagiarism

The Stanford University Honor Code is a part of this course. Re-read the Honor Code, understand it and abide by it. For the purposes of this course, pay particular attention to the provisions about plagiarism:

> For purposes of the Stanford University Honor Code, plagiarism is defined as the use, without giving reasonable and appropriate credit to or acknowledging the author or source, of another person's original work, whether such work is made up of code, formulas, ideas, language, research, strategies, writing or other form(s).

It is important to stress that ignorance of the Stanford University Honor Code or the lack of intent to violate the Honor Code does not constitute a defense. Penalties for violation of the Honor Code (including plagiarism) can be serious (e.g., suspension, and even expulsion).

Students with Disabilities

Students who may need academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk, phone (650) 723-1066.

Readings

All the weekly readings will be available on Canvas. Students are expected to read all the required readings prior to the class and come prepared to discuss them. Students should bring a copy (printed or electronic) of the relevant readings to each class. I will post additional materials on the syllabus and on Canvas. These are **optional** materials – you are not required to read them on an ongoing basis, but you should feel free to utilize them as you write your interpretive response paper, prepare for class leadership, and work on your final assignments.

Week 1 | Introduction | Misinformation and Democracy: Past and Present

October 2

Required Reading:

- Adam J. Berinsky, *Political Rumors: Why we Accept Misinformation and How to Fight it* (introduction)
- Andrew M. Guess and Benjamin A. Lyons, "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda," in *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, ed. Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker (Cambridge University Press, 2020): 10-33

Supplemental Reading:

- Jennifer Jerit and Yangzi Zhao, "Political Misinformation," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 77-85.
- Melissa Lane, "What is Disinformation?" Human Value Forum, Nov. 1, 2021.
- Claussen and Zenobi, "Fiction and Disinformation in Early Modern Europe: An Introduction," *Past & Present*, Volume 257, Issue Supplement 16 (November 2022): 1–18
- Robert Darnton, "The True History of Fake News," *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 13, 2017.

Week 2 | Thucydides | Democratic Leadership and Decision-Making

October 9

Required Reading:

- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (**read:** 1.139-1.146, 2.34-2.46, 2.59-2.65, 3.36-3.49, 6.8-6.24)
- Lenz, Gabriel S. *Follow the Leader: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012
- James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert F. Ric, "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship," *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (Aug. 2000): 790-816

Supplemental Reading:

- Maurice Pope, "Thucydides and Democracy," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 3rd Qtr., 1988, Bd. 37, H. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1988), pp. 276-296
- Josiah Ober, "Thucydides' Criticism of Democratic Knowledge," in *Nomodeiktes: Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald*, eds. Ralph M. Rosen and Joseph Farell. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Gerald M. Mara, "Thucydides and Plato on Democracy and Trust," *The Journal of Politics* 63, no. 3 (Aug. 2001)
- Clifford Orwin, "Democracy and Distrust: A Lesson from Thucydides," *The American Scholar*, Summer 1984, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1984), pp. 313-325
- Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, "Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy," *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 3 (Aug. 2009): 387-406

Week 3 | Plato | Truth, Knowledge, and Political Rule

October 16

Required Reading:

- Plato, *Republic* (**Read**: 368c-370c, 427d-433d, 473a-476c, 484a-504a, 557a-561a)
- Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016 (chapters 1 & 2)

Supplemental Reading:

- David Estlund, "Why Not Epistocracy?" in *Desire, Identity and Existence: Essays in honor of T. M. Penner*, Academic Printing and Publishing, 2003.
- Paul Gunn, "Against Epistocracy," *Critical Review* 31, no. 1 (2019)
- James N. Druckman, "Threats to Science: Politicization, Misinformation, and Inequalities," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 700, no. 1 (May 2022)

Week 4 | Aristotle | Democratic Decision-Making Revisited

October 23

Required Reading:

- Aristotle, *Politics* (**read:** book I, sections 1-3 & book 3)
- Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020 (chapter 1 and selections of chapter 2 [pp. 25-33, 44-52)
- Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017 (chapters 1 & 2)

Supplemental Reading:

- Josiah Ober, "Democracy's Wisdom: An Aristotelian Middle Way for Collective Judgment," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (Feb. 2013): 104 - 122
- Feng Shi, Misha Teplitskiy, Eamon Duede & James A. Evans, "The Wisdom of Polarized Crowds," *Nature Human Behaviour,* volume 3 (2019): 329–336
- Joshua Becker, Ethan Porter, and Damon Centola, "The Wisdom of Partisan Crowds," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 22 (May 2019): 10717-10722
- Garett Jones, *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020 (selections)

Week 5 | Aristotle | *Stasis*, Regime Change, and Political Stability

October 30

Required Reading:

- Aristotle, *Politics* (**read**: books IV and V)
- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*. New York: Broadway Books, 2019 (introduction and chapter 4).
- Danielle Allen, "The Road from Serfdom: How Americans can Become Citizens Again," *The Atlantic*, December 2019.

Week 6 | Sallust | How to Stop a Conspiracy

November 6

Required Reading:

- Sallust, *How to Stop a Conspiracy: An Ancient Guide to Saving a Republic*, trans. and ed. Josiah Osgood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

- Nicolas Guilhot, "How Not to Save Democracy," *London Review of Books,* December 22, 2022.
- Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assult on Democracy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019 (**read:** introduction and ch. 2, pp. 1-16 & 42-58)

Supplemental Reading:

- Final Report, Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, December 22, 2022. 117th Congress Second Session House Report 117-663 (read: executive summary, pp. 1-128)
- Alfred Moore, "Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic Politics," *Critical Review* 28, no. 1 (2016): 1-23

Week 7 | Machiavelli | Truth in Politics, Republic Virtue

November 13

Required Reading:

- Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Russell Price, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019 (**Read:** dedicatory letter and chs. 8, 15, 18, 21)
- Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996 (**Read**: 1.9, 1.16*,* 2.2, 1.57-58)
- Vernon White, "Truth Pursued," in *Truth in Public Life,* ed. Claire Foster-Gilbert (London: Haus, 2020).
- Linda Zerilli, "Fact-Checking and Truth-Telling in an Age of Alternative Facts," *Le foucaldien* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1–22

Supplemental Reading:

- Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press, 2000
- John McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli.* Princeton University Press, 2018.

*** Research paper proposals due ***

Week 8 | Thanksgiving break – NO CLASS

November 20

Week 9| Hobbes | Epistemic Fragmentation

November 27

Required Reading:

- Hobbes, *Leviathan* (**read:** dedicatory letter, Hobbes's introduction, chapters 1-2, 4-6, 12-15)
- de Ridder, J. "Deep Disagreements and Political Polarization," in *Political Epistemology*, ed. E. Edenberg, & M. Hannon, pp. 226-243. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Tiffany Hsu and Steven Lee Myers, "Can We No Longer Believe Anything We See?" *New York Times,* April 8, 2023 (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/08/business/media/ai-generated-images.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article)

Supplemental Reading:
- David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*. Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Sharon Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind over Matter*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Richard Tuck, *Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Brian G. Southwell et al., "Defining and Measuring Scientific Misinformation," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 700, no. 1 (May 2022).
- "Metrics, Principles, and Standards for Dissociation from Fossil Fuels at Princeton University," A Report prepared by Princeton University's Faculty Panel on Fossil Fuel Dissociation, pp. 15-27 (charge 1: disinformation by fossil fuel companies)

Week 10 | Mill | Fake-News and Free Speech

December 4

Required Reading:

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (chapters I, II, and IV)
- Rob Reich, Mehran Sahami, Jeremy M. Weinstein. *System Error: Where Big Tech Went Wrong and How We Can Reboot*. HarperCollins, 2022 (Ch. 7)
- Steven Lee Myers, "Free Speech vs. Disinformation Comes to a Head," *NYT* Feb. 9, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/09/business/free-speech-social-media-lawsuit.html

Supplemental Reading:

- Dabhoiwala, "Inventing Free Speech: Politics, Liberty and Print in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, Volume 257, Issue Supplement 16 (November 2022): 39-74.
- Pew Research Center, "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online," Oct. 2017.