This class combines roughly 90 hours of lecture, reading and essay writing for 3 credits.

**Overview:**
Writers of “nonfiction” material have been augmenting their stories with falsehoods and omissions since the dawn of time. In recent years, though, opportunities to lie have multiplied, and an entire industry has developed to specialize in politically-motivated half-truth — spin. Moreover, specialized news media outlets have developed whose entire business plan involves spinning the news in a political direction that will appeal to their audiences. The result is heavily spun and even wholly fabricated information going viral and developing enough narrative power to compete with actual truth.

To make matters more dicey, crowdsourcing techniques have made it possible to receive information from sources that were never before tapped. Quiet, observant members of the public and crazed conspiracy theorists alike are being asked to weigh in with information on subjects ranging from political events to unsolved murders. Political actors have not been slow to seize upon the resulting information overload to push their own agendas, sometimes seeking to override provable fact with mountains of confident assertions to the contrary. To the people who evaluate this information has fallen the task of sifting through mountains of sketchy information and determining what, if anything, might be credible.

For a professional media producer, the stakes can be very high indeed. A person who is too skeptical might scoff at and pass up a dramatic but true tidbit that, in the hands of a more discerning media creative, would become a viral hit or even a lucrative franchise. A person who is too open-minded might very well find him/herself professionally embarrassed by picking up and passing on a false report.

**Learning objectives:**
This class will give you clear, specific guidelines and tools to apply to all media you consume, which will help you evaluate whether something “too funny to be true” actually is. It will also help you develop a sense for what a writer sounds like when s/he is spinning or fabricating. After
reading many examples of fake nonfiction, seeing many examples of fraudulent multimedia assets, learning about the social and historical contexts that made them possible, and participating directly in exercises in which you ferret out “red flags,” you will develop a sort of hackles-up sense for questionable content. This sense will tell you when to probe more deeply.

Course requirements:
The primary key to success in this course is time. Because our goal here is to guide you toward a finely-tuned nose for B.S., this isn’t one of those classes that you can ignore for several weeks and then catch up on with an all-nighter. If you don’t put the time in (an average of 8 hours per week, including the readings) you will not have those skills at the end, and there will be nothing you can do about it short of re-taking the class.

This is a reading-intensive course. The most valuable aspect of this course is the sense that you will develop following four solid weeks of reading and discussing and writing about fake nonfiction. You will be reading an average of 200 pages per week. Luckily most of them will be pretty entertaining.

Prerequisite courses:
This class requires NMC 101 Introduction to New Media as a prerequisite, and NMC 260 New Media Futures as a co-requisite.

Required books:
- Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*. Princeton: PU Press, 2005 (only buy this one if you want it as a souvenir; otherwise, you can get full text via OneSearch)

Grading:
This class offers two different grading paradigms. The difference between them is attendance. In the Enhanced Curriculum, attendance is graded at 15 percent, with the impact of the essay and final exam reduced. I recommend that you choose the Enhanced Option if you know you will be attending every class (because it’s easy to get 100 percent credit for attendance, whereas most students will only be hitting 80 percent or so on exams) or if you think the commitment and consequences for skipping lectures will help you resist the temptation to do so.

The Enhanced Grading Option is an opt-in program. To opt in, send me an e-mail before class time on Tuesday of Week 2. After that deadline, you may not switch tracks.

Grade calculation for Standard Grading Option:
- **Midterm 1**: 25 percent. The midterm is an in-class test and is open-note. 5 of the 25 points is for a “cheat-sheet” which you’ll prepare and bring to the test. Requests for midterm make-ups will only be considered if you contact me at least three hours before class time.

- **Midterm 2**: 25 percent. This is a take-home test, and is a practical application of BS detection to two published articles — one that I supply, and one that you find.

- **Final essay**: 35 percent. In this project, you will find a major work of nonfiction media — a book, a documentary film or a magazine article of at least 9,000 words — that you suspect is deceitful, or that many people have challenged as deceitful, but which you think is legit. Alternately, you can choose one of the books on our list that purport to have solved the mystery of the identity of D.B. Cooper. You’ll investigate it, using your new-found powers of spin detection, and release your analysis and findings in a five- to eight-page paper, due during Finals Week.

- **Discussion board participation**: 15 percent. Evaluated based on thoughtful and useful questions and information sharing on the discussion board. **If you don’t participate, you won’t get any of these 15 points.**

- **Attendance**: Zero percent of your grade. However, one percentage point of extra credit will be given if you miss no more than one class (for any reason) all term.

**Grade calculation for Enhanced Grading Option:**

- **Midterm 1**: Grading weight unchanged (25%).
- **Midterm 2**: Grading weight reduced from 25% to 20%.
- **Final essay**: Grading weight reduced from 35% to 25%.
- **Discussion board participation**: Grading weight unchanged (15%)  
- **Attendance**: Grading weight increased to 15%. You can miss up to two classes without penalty; after that, each absence costs 5 percentage points (half a letter grade!). The one percentage point of extra credit if you miss no more than one class remains available as well.

**Extra credit policy:**

- After the first midterm, there is always a generous supply of extra credit possible on any test or essay. The purpose of this is to make sure that if you bomb the first midterm, you can claw your way back on the next one. It won’t be easy, but you can do it.

- Attendance bonus: As mentioned above, if you miss no more than one lecture (for any reason), you’ll receive one percentage point of extra credit.

**Miscellaneous:**

Late assignments and midterm make-ups are accepted only by special arrangement. Most of the time (almost always), I allow assignments to be completed late, subject to the standard penalty, **if a request is made before the deadline**. The standard late penalty for graded work
(that is, the midterm, final and essay) is 10% per 24-hour block of time. In most circumstances, I apply a grace period of several hours, but again, only if you contact me before the deadline comes.

The bear traps:
There are two common mistakes that students make in my classes and I would like them to please stop making them, because I don’t like giving people Fs. Here they are:

1. The Onion. Every term, so far, at least one student has tried to bust some bullshit in The Onion, or another known satirical Website (The Daily Currant; Free Wood Post; World News Daily Report; Andy Borowitz’s articles in the New Yorker — the list is long, and the only way to know for sure is Google). Watch out for this. If you do this on the second midterm, it can really hurt your grade. Remember, satire isn’t bullshit. To be bullshit, a source has to present itself as truth.

2. Unattributed copying (from source texts, from each other, etc.). For best results, use your own words for everything. You’re encouraged to study together with other people and to share notes with each other.* But when it comes time to write your test out, you must do your own and not share it with anyone. Any answer that is an exact or almost-exact copy of something else will simply be thrown out unless it’s in quotes and attributed. (No “works cited” necessary; attribute the way you would naturally, as in [According to www.goofy.com, “Jacksonville native Pinto Colvig was an animation pioneer.”] )

Most cases of unattributed copying are careless errors. However, really egregious cases that cross the line into actual cheating may be grounds for a referral to Student Conduct.

* Please note that “share notes” does not mean it’s OK for you to borrow a friend’s rough outline for a paper or take-home test and create your own version from it.

Accessibility: Accommodations are collaborative efforts between students, faculty and Disability Access Services (DAS). Students with accommodations approved through DAS are responsible for contacting the faculty member in charge of the course prior to or during the first week of the term to discuss accommodations. Students who believe they are eligible for accommodations but who have not yet obtained approval through DAS should contact DAS immediately at 737-4098.