NMC 341: Media Spin and Deception Detection

Fall 2018
3 credit lecture class
2-2:50 p.m. MWF
Room 261, Strand Ag Hall

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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. Recent developments in networked media, however, have provoked a rapidly accelerating increase in the number of opportunities to practice deception on a mass-media scale. These opportunities have inspired numerous shady practitioners trying, with increasing sophistication, to use these tools to bamboozle enough members of the public to make money or seize political power.

For a media practitioner, the cost of being an easy target for these operators, in reputation and income, can be very high indeed. This class aims to help you use sociological and psychological cues in tandem with knowledge of production techniques to avoid such pitfalls and make yourself harder to fool.

Course Description:
In this course, students will learn to use sociological, psychological and rhetorical cues as well as knowledge of media production techniques to identify, and subsequently investigate, media content in which there is an elevated likelihood of intent to deceive or manipulate.

Learning outcomes:
Students who successfully complete this class will be able to:

- Identify media content in which there is a higher-than-usual likelihood of deception;
- Demonstrate critical thinking in the evaluation of truth claims in all media channels;
- Evaluate potentially troublesome media content to ascertain whether it is deceptive;
- Recognize the rhetorical styles that are most susceptible to being used for deception;
- Recognize the logical fallacies and propaganda techniques that are most commonly used to deceive;
- Recognize the use of heuristics and priming effects in daily life, and analyze how deceptive media seeks to take advantage of them;
Comprehend the sociological and psychological explanations of the success of deceptive media actors in the past, and
  ○ Synthesize a mental model of what such actors’ modern analogues might be;
Comprehend the motives of deceptive media content creators of the past, and
  ○ Analyze how those models might play out in the media environment of today.

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.

Watch out for these common mistakes:
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.** Occasionally a student will try to use an article from 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 the same as deception.** To be deceptive media, 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. This Web page details the expectations for student conduct: http://studentlife.oregonstate.edu/code

* 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.

**Statement Regarding Students with Disabilities:** Accommodations for students with disabilities are determined and approved by Disability Access Services (DAS). If you, as a student, believe you are eligible for accommodations but have not obtained approval please contact DAS immediately at 541-737-4098 or at http://ds.oregonstate.edu. DAS notifies students and faculty members of approved academic accommodations and coordinates implementation of those accommodations. While not required, students and faculty members are encouraged to discuss details of the implementation of individual accommodations.
Class calendar:

I. Week 1:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Overview;
      2. The major "Red Flags" of deceptive media;
      3. The Stephen Glass story.
   B. Readings:
      1. "On Bullshit" by Harry Frankfurt;

II. Week 2:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. The Mike Daisey story;
      2. Trust Indexes;
      3. Lying with Statistics
   B. Readings:
      1. Excerpt from "I'm from the Future and Here's How it Works" by Nick Bilton;
      2. "Jimmy's World" by Janet Cooke;
      3. Half of "How to Lie with Statistics" by Darrell Huff
   C.

III. Week 3:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. History of Propaganda;
      2. The Edward Bernays story;
   B. Readings:
      1. Finish "How to Lie with Statistics";
      2. First half of "Trust Me, I'm Lying" by Ryan Holiday
   C.

IV. Week 4:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Media Richness Theory;
      2. Ryan Holiday and Following the Money
   B. Readings:
      1. Finish "Trust Me, I'm Lying" by Ryan Holiday
   C.

V. Week 5:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Fake news and confirmation bias;
      2. midterm;
      3. Logical fallacies
B. Readings:
   1. Excerpt from "The Cheating Culture" by David Callahan

C.

VI. Week 6:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. The Greg Mortenson story and the James Frey story;
      2. Janet Cooke and Cheating Culture;
      3. Final project planning & the D.B. Cooper story
   B. Readings:
      1. Excerpt from "A Million Little Pieces" by James Frey;
      2. excerpt from "Three Cups of Tea" by Greg Mortenson

C.

VII. Week 7:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Internal worlds;
      2. The Jack Kelley story;
      3. In-class evaluation of claims made in an episode of "Penn & Teller's Bullshit."
   B. Readings:
      1. "Take our Children" and "Remorseless Troops" by Jack Kelley;
      2. "A Question of Credibility" by Jacques Steinberg;
      3. Chapter 7 of "The Cheating Culture" by David Callahan.
   C. Assignments:
      1. Final project proposal due WED Week 7.

VIII. Week 8:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Fake photography since 1860;
      2. Fake video;
   B. Readings:
      1. "The Hidden Signs that can Reveal a Fake Photo" by Tiffanie Wen;
      2. "Fake Videos are On the rise" by David Pierson;
      3. "How to Spot a Deep-Face-Swapped Video" by Harry Guiness;
      4. Part 1 of "Thinking Fast and Slow" by Daniel Kahneman

C.

IX. Week 9:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Defense vs. counterattack;
      2. Heuristics and Information Cascades;
      3. Signaling Theory
   B. Readings:
      1. Parts II-IV of "Thinking Fast and Slow" by Daniel Kahneman;
      2. Excerpt from "Reputation: What it Is and Why it Matters" by Gloria Origgi
   C. Assignments:
1. Take-home midterm due WED Week 9

D. Week 10:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Peer review: what it is and what it isn't;
      2. P-hacking and other research misconduct;
      3. Fake academic journals.
   B. Readings:
      1. Excerpt from "Bad Science: Quacks, Hacks, and Big Pharma Flacks" by Ben Goldacre

XI. Finals Week:
   A. Lecture topics:
      1. Discuss and turn in final projects.

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### Learning Outcomes Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcome</th>
<th>Addressed in the following:</th>
<th>Assessed/evaluated in:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ID media content with high likelihood of deception</td>
<td>I.A.2, II.A.2, II.B.1, III.A.3, III.B.2, IV.A.2, V.A.1, V.B.1, VIII.A.1-2, VIII.B.1-3, IX.A.3, X.A.3</td>
<td>Midterm 1, Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate critical thinking in evaluating truth claims</td>
<td>V.A.1 and 3; VII.A.3, IX.A.2-3</td>
<td>Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluate potentially troublesome media content</td>
<td>II.A.3, III.A.3, IV.A.2, V.A.1, VI.A.2</td>
<td>Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize rhetorical styles used for deception</td>
<td>III.A.3, VII.A.3, V.A.3, IX.A.1-3</td>
<td>Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize use of heuristics and priming effects to deceive</td>
<td>VIII.B.4, IX.A.2, IX.B.1-2</td>
<td>Final project</td>
</tr>
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<td>Comprehend sociological &amp; psychological background</td>
<td>III.A.1-2; IV.A.1, V.A.1, VI.A.2, VIII.B.4, IX.A.2-3; IX.B.1</td>
<td>Midterm 1, Final Project</td>
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<td>Comprehend motives of deceptive content creators</td>
<td>III.A.1; III.B.2; V.A.1; V.B.1; VII.A.1; VIII.A.3; IX.A.2-3</td>
<td>Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
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<td>Analyze how historical models might/do play out today</td>
<td>II.A.2; II.B.3; IV.A.1-2; V.A.1; VIII.B.1-3; IX.A.3</td>
<td>Midterm 2, Final Project</td>
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