

Course Information

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| Course Number: | COMM 658 |
| Course Title: | SEMINAR IN COMM CULTURE Dark Arts of Communication: Manipulation, Propaganda, Demagoguery |
| Section: | 600 |
| Time: | Thursday 8:30-11:00 |
| Location: | Bolton 213 |
| Credit Hours: | 3 |

Instructor Details

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| Instructor: | Dr. Jennifer Mercieca |
| Office: | Bolton 202G |
| Phone: | n/a |
| E-Mail: | mercieca@tamu.edu |
| Office Hours: | Thursday 11-1:00 and by appointment |

Course Description

Investigation of the ways that culture, religion, identity, gender, popular culture, community, history, and related ideas are shaped through communication in order to understand the development of social norms, political values, and the human experience. We will examine how “dark persuasion” techniques like propaganda and demagoguery relate to democracy, democratic deliberation, media, and communication ethics. The course is designed to give graduate students a strong background in issues related to democracy and democratic erosion, demagogues and demagoguery, and the weaponized communication practices of propaganda. We will examine difficult questions of ethics in persuasion, consent, and how to create a productive public sphere. We will examine historical and current cases of demagoguery and propaganda by governments, corporations, politicians, and citizens. We will closely examine how our brains process information and how those natural processes lead to cognitive weaknesses that are exploited by dark arts techniques.

Course Prerequisites

Graduate classification.

Special Course Designation

None.

Course Learning Outcomes

- Students will develop their critical thinking skills
- Students will develop their writing skills

- Students will develop their analysis skills

Textbook and/or Resource Materials

All readings are listed below in the course calendar. All readings are available as pdfs on the course website except for Jennifer Mercieca, Demagogue For President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump, which is available in print and ereader through the library (or wherever books are sold) and online via audiobook.

Grading Policy

- Grading Scale: 90-100: A; 80-89: B; 70-79: C; 60-69: D; 59 and below: F
- Class assignments:

Weekly Essay Assignment: each week there will be a writing prompt based upon that week's readings. You are required to write a two-page response to the question I've asked, drawing from the week's readings to explain your answer (quote from the readings as evidence to explain your position). Your weekly essay will be due at the beginning of class each week as indicated on your weekly calendar. Your paper should be double spaced, free from proofreading errors, well-focused on the question I've asked, and incorporate quotations from that week's assigned readings. You will find each week's writing prompt on the class calendar below. Each week's essay is worth 5 points (14 x 5 = 70 points total). Turn in each weekly essay via Canvas.

Final Paper Assignment: select one of the weekly writing prompts and (incorporating my feedback from your first paper) expand upon your answer to include reflections from the readings from the rest of the semester. Your final paper will be **due by midnight May 9**. Your paper should be double spaced, free from proofreading errors, well-focused on the question I've asked, and incorporate quotations from readings throughout the semester. You may wish to include your own research and analysis of a real-world example in your final paper. This is fine, but is not required. Your final paper should be 20-25 pages in length. Your final paper is worth 30 points. Turn in your final paper via Canvas.

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| Weekly Essays | 70 |
| Final Essay | 30 |

Total Possible Points = 100

Late Work Policy

- *Late work is accepted until the last regularly schedule class day.*
- *There is no penalty for university-excused late work. Contact me if you're having difficulty. ([Student Rule 7](#)).*

Course Schedule

January 20, 2022

Week 1: On truth: rhetoric as method/philosophy as method/science as method/authority as method

Readings:

1. Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 9-17 and "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," 258-266.
2. Ellen M. Mitchell, "The Platonic Dialectic," 212-223 and Plato, "Allegory of the Cave," 1-6.
3. Stanford Encyclopedia: Scientific Method, 1-30.
4. Argumentum Ad Verecundiam (Argument from Authority), 1-15.

DQ: What would you say is the relationship between communication and truth?

Watch: Return to the Source Philosophy and the Matrix, <https://vimeo.com/49527507> (60 minutes)

January 27, 2022

Week 2: The relationship between persuasion and coercion and consent

Readings:

1. Daniel O'Keefe, *Persuasion: Theory and Research*, 19-51.
2. Steven Hassan, "The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking and the Law," 6-69.
3. Jennifer Mercieca, "Rhetoric and Political Consent: Tacit and Express Consent in Enlightenment Political Theory," 1-14.
4. Penny Powers, "Persuasion and Coercion: A Critical Review of Philosophical and Empirical Approaches," 125-143.

DQ: What are the distinctions between persuasion and coercion?

Watch: Persuasion Psychology: "Reactance" and Overcoming Resistance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUw6BbGIAAnM> (4:17)

February 3, 2022

Week 3: Emotion/Cognition/Persuasion

Readings:

1. Richard E. Petty and Pablo Briñol, "Emotion and persuasion: Cognitive and meta-cognitive processes impact attitudes, 1-26.
2. Melanie B. Tannenbaum, Justin Hepler, Rick S. Zimmerman, Lindsey Saul, Samantha

Jacobs, Kristina Wilson, and Dolores Albarracin, "Appealing to fear: A Meta-Analysis of Fear Appeal Effectiveness and Theories," 1178-1204.

3. William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, and Jay J. Van Bavel, "Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks," 7313-7318.
4. William J. Brady, Killian McLoughlin, Tuan N. Doan, Molly J. Crockett, "How social learning amplifies moral outrage expression in online social networks," 1-14.
5. William J. Brady, M. J. Crockett, and Jay J. Van Bavel, "The MAD Model of Moral Contagion: The Role of Motivation, Attention, and Design in the Spread of Moralized Content Online," 1-33.
6. Mari Fitzduff, "The Amygdala Hijack," 1-12.

DQ: How can our emotions be used against us?

Watch: How Social Media Profits from Our Moral Emotions, <https://bigthink.com/the-present/molly-crockett-outraged-all-the-time-how-social-media-addicts-us-to-anger/> (7:23)

February 10, 2022

Week 4: Thinking Fast/Slow

Readings:

1. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Introduction & Part One, 8-122 (the pdf has the whole book if you're interested to read more, but it isn't required for class)

DQ: How do you think System 1 and System 2 thinking affects our ability to consent to what we believe is true?

Watch: Why you think you're right -- even if you're wrong, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4RLfVxTGH4> (11:37)

February 17, 2022

Week 5: Propagandists for Propaganda

Readings:

1. Plato, *Gorgias*, 1-85.
2. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, 19-31.
3. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 3-190.

DQ: How is propaganda anti-democratic?

Watch: Edward L. Bernays interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg1jOLBzvvY> (34:12)

February 24, 2022

Week 6: Polarization/Social Status/Groupthink

Readings:

1. Will Storr, *The Status Game: On Social Position and How We Use It* (20-75, 82-87, 109-116, 129-153).
2. Paul 't Hart, "Irving L. Janis' *Victims of Groupthink*," 247-278.
3. Eden Hennessey, Matthew Feinberg, Anne E. Wilson, "How political partisanship can shape memories and perceptions of identical protest events," 1-13.
4. Steve Rathjea, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, "Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media," 1-9.
5. Eli J. Finkel, Christopher A. Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter H. Ditto, Shanto Iyengar, Samara Klar, Lilliana Mason, Mary C. McGrath, Brendan Nyhan, David G. Rand, Linda J. Skitka, Joshua A. Tucker, Jay J. Van Bavel, Cynthia S. Wang, James N. Druckman, "Political sectarianism in America," 533-536.

DQ: How can our group identities be used to manipulate us?

Watch: How can groups make good decisions?

https://www.ted.com/talks/mariano_sigman_and_dan_ariely_how_can_groups_make_good_decisions?language=en#t-104041 (6:40)

March 3, 2022

Week 7: Propaganda is Communication for Warfare

Readings:

1. Edward Bernays, "The Marketing of National Policies: A Study of War Propaganda," 236-244.
2. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler*, 99-135, 255-278.
3. Joel E. Dimsdale, *Dark Persuasion: A History of Brainwashing from Pavlov to Social Media* (i-x, 1-12, 205-211, 212-226).

DQ: Why is propaganda a method of war?

Watch: How to Recognize Propaganda, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATY0KhMSOfY> (26:39)

March 10, 2022

Week 8: Manufacture of Consent/Vertical Propaganda & Manufacture of Dissent/Horizontal Propaganda

Readings:

1. Jacques Ellul, "Categories of Propaganda," 61-87.
2. Chomsky, "Media Control," 5-58.
3. Jennifer Mercieca, "We are all propagandists now," 1-4.

DQ: How has participatory media changed propaganda?

Watch: The Five Filters of the Mass Media Machine,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34LGPIXvU5M> (4:46)

March 17, 2022

Week 9: SPRING BREAK

March 24, 2022

Week 10: Techniques 1: Magician's Force/Reflexive Control/Nudge

Readings:

1. The Rand Corporation, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," 1-14.
2. Timothy L. Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," 237-256.
3. Alice Pailhes, Ronald A. Rensink, Gustav Kuhn, "A Psychologically Based Taxonomy of Magicians' Forcing Techniques," 1-12.
4. Evan Selinger and Kyle Whyte, "Is There a Right Way to Nudge? The Practice and Ethics of Choice Architecture," 923-935.
5. Barnabas Szaszi, Anna Palinkas, Bence Palfi, Aba Szollosi And Balazs Aczel, "A Systematic Scoping Review of the Choice Architecture Movement: Toward Understanding When and Why Nudges Work," 355-366.

DQ: How does nudging deny us the ability to consent?

Watch: The science of illusion,
https://www.ted.com/talks/david_kwong_the_science_of_illusion (12:16)

March 31, 2022

Week 11: Techniques 2: Framing/Constituting/Narrative

Readings:

1. Benedetto De Martino, Dharshan Kumaran, Ben Seymour, Raymond J. Dolan, "Frames, Biases, and Rational Decision-Making in the Human Brain," 1-5.
2. Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois, 133-150.
3. Iiro P. Jääskeläinen, Vasily Klucharev, Ksenia Panidi, and Anna N. Shestakova "Neural Processing of Narratives: From Individual Processing to Viral Propagation," 1-9.
4. Greg J. Stephensa, Lauren J. Silbertc, and Uri Hassonc, "Speaker-listener neural coupling underlies successful communication," 14425-14430.
5. Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," 1-22.
6. Olivia M. Bullock, Hillary C. Shulman, and Richard Huskey, "Narratives are Persuasive Because They are Easier to Understand: Examining Processing Fluency as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion," 1-12.

DQ: Why are we vulnerable to frame and narrative manipulation?

Watch: How Language Shapes the Way We think,

https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think
(14:03)

April 7, 2022

Week 12: Techniques 3: Slogans/Repetition

Readings:

1. Robert E. Denton, "The Rhetorical Functions Of Slogans: Classifications And Characteristics," 10-18.
2. Raunak M. Pillai and Lisa K. Fazio, "The effects of repeating false and misleading information on belief," 1-21.
3. Aumyo Hassan and Sarah J. Barber, "The effects of repetition frequency on the illusory truth effect," 1-12.
4. Lisa K. Fazio & David G. Rand & Gordon Pennycook, "Repetition increases perceived truth equally for plausible and implausible statements," 1705-1710.
5. Renee A. Irvin, "How Slogans Curate Public Opinion: Hard Lessons from Lakoff and the Linguists," 433-447.

DQ: How do message repetition and amplification influence us without our consent?

Watch: Why we love repetition in music,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lo8EomDrwA&t=231s> (4:31)

April 14, 2022

Week 13: Techniques 4: Conspiracy

Readings:

1. Hans Grassegger, "The Unbelievable Story Of The Plot Against George Soros," 1-11.
2. Joshua Hart and Molly Graether, "Something's Going on Here: Psychological Predictors of Belief in Conspiracy Theories," 229-237.
3. Dale, "Donald Trump voters: We like the president's lies," 1-6.
4. Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Joline Ligthart, Sabine Rosema and Yang Xu, "The entertainment value of conspiracy theories," 25-48.
5. M. Asher Lawson and Hemant Kakkar, "Of Pandemics, Politics, and Personality: The Role of Conscientiousness and Political Ideology in the Sharing of Fake News," 1-25.
6. Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkey Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, Farzin Deravi "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," 3-36.

DQ: How does conspiracy influence us without our consent?

Watch: What is the QAnon conspiracy theory? <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-the-qanon-conspiracy-theory/> (25:31)

April 21, 2022

Week 14: Techniques 5: Controlling Public Discourse/Overton Window/Disinformation/Meme Warfare

Readings:

1. Russell, "An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibilities," 1-6.
2. Joshua A. Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barberá, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan, "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," 1-95.
3. Renee DiResta, "The Digital Maginot Line," 1-9.
4. Giese, "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare," 1-8.
5. Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, Tom Wilson, "Disinformation as Collaborative Work," 1-24.

DQ: Do you think democracy can survive the manipulation of public discourse?

Watch: The Alt-Right Playbook: Control the Conversation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaPgDQkmqM&list=PLJA_jUddXvY7v0VkyRbANnTnzkA_HMFtQ&index=2 (10:46)

April 28, 2022

Week 15: Techniques 6: Demagogues & Demagoguery

Readings:

1. Jennifer Mercieca, *Demagogue for President: the Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump*. (entire)
Available in ebook, audio, or print through the tamu library.

DQ: What do you think could be done to stop a presidential candidate from using demagoguery?

Watch: "Very stable genius? Is Donald Trump a rhetorical master?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvzJlqxznTM&t=1s> (5:09)

University Policies

Attendance Policy

The university views class attendance and participation as an individual student responsibility. Students are expected to attend class and to complete all assignments.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about excused absences, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Makeup Work Policy

Students will be excused from attending class on the day of a graded activity or when attendance contributes to a student's grade, for the reasons stated in Student Rule 7, or other reason deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about makeup work, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Absences related to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 may necessitate a period of more than 30 days for make-up work, and the timeframe for make-up work should be agreed upon by the student and instructor" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.1](#)).

"The instructor is under no obligation to provide an opportunity for the student to make up work missed because of an unexcused absence" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.2](#)).

Students who request an excused absence are expected to uphold the Aggie Honor Code and Student Conduct Code. (See [Student Rule 24](#).)

Academic Integrity Statement and Policy

"An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do."

"Texas A&M University students are responsible for authenticating all work submitted to an instructor. If asked, students must be able to produce proof that the item submitted is indeed the work of that student. Students must keep appropriate records at all times. The inability to authenticate one's work, should the instructor request it, may be sufficient grounds to initiate an academic misconduct case" ([Section 20.1.2.3, Student Rule 20](#)).

Texas A&M at College Station

You can learn more about the Aggie Honor System Office Rules and Procedures, academic integrity, and your rights and responsibilities at aggiehonor.tamu.edu.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy

Texas A&M University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Resources office on your campus (resources listed below) Disabilities may include, but are not limited to attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability related needs with Disability Resources and their instructors as soon as possible.

Texas A&M at College Station

Disability Resources is located in the Student Services Building or at (979) 845-1637 or visit disability.tamu.edu.

Title IX and Statement on Limits to Confidentiality

Texas A&M University is committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws prohibit gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.

With the exception of some medical and mental health providers, all university employees (including full and part-time faculty, staff, paid graduate assistants, student workers, etc.) are Mandatory Reporters and must report to the Title IX Office if the employee experiences, observes, or becomes aware of an incident that meets the following conditions (see [University Rule 08.01.01.M1](#)):

- The incident is reasonably believed to be discrimination or harassment.
- The incident is alleged to have been committed by or against a person who, at the time of the incident, was (1) a student enrolled at the University or (2) an employee of the University.

Mandatory Reporters must file a report regardless of how the information comes to their attention – including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Although Mandatory Reporters must file a report, in most instances, a person who is subjected to the alleged conduct will be able to control how the report is handled, including whether or not to pursue a formal investigation. The University's goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and to ensure access to the resources you need.

Texas A&M at College Station

Students wishing to discuss concerns in a confidential setting are encouraged to make an appointment with [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS).

Students can learn more about filing a report, accessing supportive resources, and navigating the Title IX investigation and resolution process on the University's [Title IX webpage](#).

Statement on Mental Health and Wellness

Texas A&M University recognizes that mental health and wellness are critical factors that influence a student's academic success and overall wellbeing. Students are encouraged to engage in healthy self-care by utilizing available resources and services on your campus

Texas A&M College Station

Students who need someone to talk to can contact Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) or call the TAMU Helpline (979-845-2700) from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours on weekends. 24-hour emergency help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255) or at suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Statement on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

FERPA is a federal law designed to protect the privacy of educational records by limiting access to these records, to establish the right of students to inspect and review their educational records and to provide guidelines for the correction of inaccurate and misleading data through informal and formal hearings. Currently enrolled students wishing to withhold any or all directory information items may do so by going to howdy.tamu.edu and clicking on the "Directory Hold Information" link in the Student Records channel on the MyRecord tab. The complete [FERPA Notice to Students](#) and the student records policy is available on the Office of the Registrar webpage.

Items that can never be identified as public information are a student's social security number, citizenship, gender, grades, GPR or class schedule. All efforts will be made in this class to protect your privacy and to ensure confidential treatment of information associated with or generated by your participation in the class.

Directory items include name, UIN, local address, permanent address, email address, local telephone number, permanent telephone number, dates of attendance, program of study (college, major, campus), classification, previous institutions attended, degrees honors and awards received, participation in officially recognized activities and sports, medical residence location and medical residence specialization.