

# TRUTH DECAY, FALL 2022

Tuesday 10:00-11:30, Virtual

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*The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists. (Hannah Arendt)*

## Course Description

A former president denies the fact that he lost the 2020 election. Progressives and libertarians, who agree on nothing else, defy science and refuse vaccinations for their children. Some academics argue that different groups have different “truths.”

Traditional news media are falsely accused of reporting fake news, while upstart media make no pretense of sticking to facts and striving for truth.

This course will look at current issues and examples in the context of evolving attitudes toward human rationality. We will discuss, too, media technology from the printing press to the Internet and their implications for journalism that pursues truth and propaganda that seeks to persuade.

### **Week One** (September 20) *The Marketplace of Ideas.*

Our country was born during a unique moment in human history called The Enlightenment, when philosophers believed men – and possibly women – were essentially rational and capable of finding a semblance of truth through free expression. Even today, most of us believe that this is how democracy ought to work.

*In this session we ask participants to look for contemporary examples of such a marketplace in “fair and balanced” news reporting and a range of opinionated sources.*

### **Week Two** (September 27) *Objective Journalism*

In the 1920s, philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann rejected most Enlightenment assumptions, proclaiming prejudice more powerful than reason, and proposing science-based objectivity as the goal of journalism and public life. Journalists should set the public agenda, frame issues, and seek truth.

*In this session we ask participants to look for contemporary examples of “objective” journalism that seeks to identify truth.*

### **Week Three (October 4) *Science and Objectivity Challenged***

From the Great Revivals of earlier centuries to Trump Populism today, “anti-intellectualism” is a recurring theme in American history. Objectivity is challenged too within the academic world in the “post modernism” movement. Perhaps truth is an outdated concept.

*In this session, we ask participants to find fact free assertions from various sources.*

### **Week Four (October 11) *Propaganda and Public Relations***

Edward Bernays’ book *Propaganda* saw in Lippmann’s insights about prejudice and human irrationality an opportunity to manipulate public opinion. Hitler demonstrated the power of these techniques. A massive industry was born.

*In this session, we ask participants to identify the propaganda and public relations that surround us.*

### **Week Five (October 18) *Gatekeepers versus Propagandists***

During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “gatekeepers” in the media waged a relatively even battle with promoters of various agendas. Technological innovations such as cable and the Internet shifted the balance of power away from the gatekeepers.

*In this session, we ask participants to distinguish between professional journalism and propaganda on the Internet*

### **Week Six (October 25) *Facebook and other social media.***

What, if anything, should be done to reduce the decay of truth in these technologies?

*In this session, we ask participants to evaluate various proposals for reform.*

### **Week Seven (November 1) *January 6 as a case study***

The aftermath of the 2020 elections dramatically demonstrated the power of propaganda. Will objective inquiry into those events prove equally powerful?

*In this session, we ask participants to look at evidence pro and con.*

### **Week Eight (November 8) *Election Day***

How “truthful” were the 2022 campaigns for governor and senator in Wisconsin? To what extent were the media “fair and balanced” and/or “objective”?