

FAKE NEWS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

FYS 169 - 01

Smith College

Fall 2019



COURSE DESCRIPTION

- Instructor: Jordan Taylor, Dewey Hall 212.
- Meeting time and place: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:45-4:00pm, Hatfield Hall 204
- Office hours: Wednesday, 2:00-3:00pm; Friday, 10:00-11:00am and by appointment
- Charlie office hours available by appointment.



Since the 2016 election, the term “fake news” has become widespread. But is the phenomenon really new? This course will bring a historical perspective to bear on the modern problem of fake news, as well as the related issue of making information systems function for a democracy. By examining the history of media, fake news, and cultures of falsehood, we will aim to better understand one of the most urgent problems of our present.

This is a writing intensive course. It is also a course designed to introduce you to public writing. As a result, you will be regularly composing short pieces of writing for a public audience.

In both the content we will be exploring and the writing projects you will undertake, this course is about the importance of evidence. Your effective use of evidence is the foundation of strong argumentative writing. Likewise, your ability to thoughtfully evaluate evidence is necessary in order to be a good digital citizen and avoid becoming the dupe of “fake news.” This course asks you to think about how people in the past and present have used evidence in journalism, law, politics, science, and elsewhere.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Argumentation: Students will develop the ability to construct a meaningful argument using evidence.

Audience: Students will demonstrate a keen awareness of public audiences in their written work.

Revision: Students will hone their capacity to edit and revise their written work in response to constructive criticism.

Information literacy: Students will develop the capacity to analyze and evaluate the information that they encounter in their everyday lives.

Civic knowledge: Students will demonstrate their recognition that they exist in a larger information ecosystem, and that their participation in it entails ethical choices.



COURSE MATERIALS

Most readings are online. Please purchase:

Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). ISBN: 978-0812250848

COURSE POLICIES

I believe you: My default position will be to trust you when you share something with me. I understand that life can be very difficult for many students. While this class covers important material, your mental and physical health is even more important. I trust students to be honest, and I trust you not to abuse that trust.

Identity: This class respects students' rights to determine their own name(s), pronouns, and identities. If you feel that these rights are not being respected, *please* speak with me. Students are expected to learn each other's names (including pronunciation) and pronouns over the course of the semester.

Religious holidays: This course respects students' observance of religious holidays. Email me if you need to be absent for a religious holiday.

Email communication: I expect all students to regularly check email. For simple queries, please consult the syllabus before emailing me. I expect you to communicate professionally and clearly over email.

Plagiarism: Using someone else's words or ideas as your own, without clearly quoting and citing them, is plagiarism. It is a violation of the Honor Code. I will follow the college's procedures regarding plagiarism, which means bringing the matter to the attention of your Class Dean and the Honor Board.

Privacy: I consider most written work turned in for the class (especially reading responses) to be fair game for class discussion or activities,



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unless it clearly discusses sensitive personal matters. If you would prefer that I refrain from using a part, or all, of your written work in class discussion, please indicate that when you turn it in. Additionally, in the case of work written for a public audience, please indicate whether you would like it to be anonymous, use your full name, or initials.

Writing for this class: This is a writing-intensive First Year Seminar course. As a result, it conforms to the College's expectations of the quantity of graded, written work. In

RESOURCES

addition to required drafts listed below, I am always happy to look at a piece of writing before it's submitted (as long as I have ample time to review it—at least 24 hours). In some cases, I may ask you to resubmit work.

Reading for this class: Readings for this course are primarily argument-driven essays. As you read, think about the following: what is the author's argument? Why is she making that claim? What evidence is she using to support it? How do you evaluate the argument?

Have you ever read something and then realized that you weren't paying attention the entire time? Simply passing your eyes over every word on the page, without thinking about it, is "lazy reading." It might make you feel like you've read the assignment, but it doesn't accomplish much. Instead, we will practice active reading. That means reading with a purpose: pause to take notes or ask questions, annotate pause to look up words or references that you don't understand, skim through repetitive sections, spend more time on meaningful sections. Reading is a conversation between you and the author. Ask them questions, challenge them, and don't take everything they say for granted.

You are not expected to read every word on every page of every reading. Your goal is to understand the reading's argument as well as the nuance and complexity that surrounds that argument. You should take some time, even if it's just five minutes, after each reading to think about what you've just worked through, and why it might be important.

Sexual Misconduct: I am a responsible reporter regarding incidents of sexual violence and misconduct. That means that I am required to report incidents of sexual violence to our campus's Title IX Coordinator. In that event, the [Title IX Office](#) will work with a small number of others on campus to ensure that appropriate measures are taken, and resources are made available to the student who may have been harmed. Protecting a student's privacy is of utmost concern, and all involved will only share information with those that need to know to ensure the University can respond and assist.

Disabilities: I will work with all students to accommodate any disabilities. Smith's excellent [Office of Disability Services](#) (ODS) will work with you even if you don't have a formal doctor's note. Please know that that you don't need to disclose your specific disability to me. My focus will be on working with you and ODS toward an appropriate accommodation.

At any point during the semester, if you need to request an accommodation, even if it's small, you are welcome to anonymously submit a request at [this Google form](#). When you submit it, I will get an email with your request but with no personal information.

Writing center: The [Jacobson Center for Writing](#) is an incredible resource that offers appointments and walk-in peer tutors to help you to develop your writing abilities. They are prepared to help students with public writing.



Community standards: On the second day of class (Sept. 10) we'll have a conversation about our course's expectations and policies concerning the following topics: discussion, respect, electronics/attention, content warnings, extensions, and privacy. You will also have a chance to raise any other issues. I have some strong preferences on certain issues, and I will express those as we discuss them. Together, we will craft a list of "community standards" that will consist of our values and expectations for this class, which I will circulate once it's finished. Because I will be enforcing these policies, I reserve the right to "veto" any policies that I feel are unworkable. Below are some questions that we can use as starting points to frame these conversations.

Discussion: how can we create space for meaningful discussions?

Respect: how can we ensure that everyone in the classroom feels respected and valued?

Electronics and attention: how do we liberate ourselves from digital distraction during class time?

Content warnings: how can we prevent trauma from harming students and interfering with student learning?

Late work and extensions: how can we allow for students to make mistakes and respond to stressful conditions while remaining fair to others?

Other topics? What other issues would you like to raise or discuss?

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION (15%)


Most class sessions will be oriented around a discussion or activity. It is essential that you read the material, attend class, pay attention, and participate. Every day after class, I assess each student's participation on a scale from zero to three. A zero represents an unexcused absence. To earn a full grade, you must not only attend and participate, but also demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the day's topic and assigned course materials. Your participation grade may suffer if you are late to class, leave early, do not participate, are disruptive, are distracting to others, abuse electronics, etc.

Note: participation is measured holistically, not just based on the number of times that you answer a question in class. Attending office hours, asking questions, listening to others, emailing me, participating in groupwork, and otherwise demonstrating engagement with the course are all potential ways of participating. It's also possible to engage in class discussion, while receiving a poor participation grade if you are disrespectful to your colleagues.

At the end of the semester, I will drop the three lowest daily grades. If you were absent three times, those zeroes will be dropped. If you attended class every day, but had three bad days for whatever reason, resulting in grades of "1" or "2," those will also be dropped. Absences resulting from emergencies may also be excused on a case-by-case basis.

**THE GREATEST
Natural & National
CURIOSITY
IN THE WORLD.**

JOICE HETH



NURSE to GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON, (the Father of our Country,) WILL BE SEEN AT

Barnum's Hotel, Bridgeport,

On FRIDAY, and SATURDAY, the 11th. & 12th days of December, DAY and EVENING.

also known as

JOICE HETH is unquestionably the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the World! She was the slave of Augustine Washington, (the father of Gen. Washington,) and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant, who, in after days, led our heroic fathers on to glory, to victory, and freedom. To use her own language when speaking of the illustrious Father of his Country, "she raised him." JOICE HETH was born in the year 1674, and has, consequently, now arrived at the astonishing

AGE OF 161 YEARS.



MEETING WITH INSTRUCTOR

You are required to meet with me one-on-one within the first three weeks of class. This meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss your expectations and hopes for the class, your learning needs, and any concerns in a casual, non-confrontational atmosphere. We may also discuss how this class can help you with your course of study at Smith College and your future.

This conversation does not need to be long. It could last anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. We may speak in office hours, before or after class, or at another time depending on your availability. You are responsible for either attending office hours or setting up another time to meet with me during the first four weeks of class. I expect you to have either met with me or scheduled a time to meet with me by **September 24**. Failing to meet with me will result in a 30% deduction to your overall participation grade.

Note on office hours: if you're not familiar with the concept of "office hours," they are a set period of time when your professors will be in their offices waiting for students to come talk with them. You might discuss the course, your work, get to know your instructor, raise concerns, or ask questions. Anything, really. Your professors are eager to talk to students in office hours. Attending office hours is a good way to ensure that your instructors know you. If you can't make office hours, just send an email letting your instructor know this, and offer some other possible times to meet.

COURSE JOURNAL (25%)

You will complete five reflective journal entries during the semester on the course's first five units: Unit 1: due Sept. 24; Unit 2: due Oct. 10; Unit 3: due Oct. 29; Unit 4: due Nov. 14; Unit 4: due Dec. 10. These journal entries must be 500-700 words.

Each journal must make a claim, or argument, relating to the material from that unit. There is no formal prompt. Rather, you will generate an idea or claim based on course materials in your journal entry. This does not need to be elaborate. For example, an appropriate argument building from Unit 1 might be "The concept of bias is useless."

You should draw connections with the readings and discussions. One goal of the journal is to provide a running record of what you've learned over the course of the semester. Another goal is to demonstrate that you've engaged with and thought about the course materials.

Journal entries will be graded on a check minus/check/check plus system. They will be evaluated based on the quality of the writing, the coherence of the argument, and the extent of their engagement with course materials (use quotes and citations—be specific!). Please don't use outside sources. These will be due on Moodle and in paper by class time.



INFORMATION INVENTORY AND REFLECTION (15%)

You will build an “inventory” of fake news, viral deception, disinformation, and other “bullshit” that you’ve been exposed to over the course of the first four weeks of the course. I do not expect for this to be totally comprehensive. Please start making note as early as possible of the information with which you’re engaging, so that you don’t need to go “hunting” for falsehoods before the assignment is due. For the purposes of this assignment, you are welcome to explore a wide range of falsehood and fake news across many media: interpersonal conversations, advertising, social media, news, your other courses (hopefully not), etc.

All fake news must relate to issues of public interest. For example, include any encounters with climate change denial, lying politicians, misleading advertisements, or an inaccurate meme on twitter. Please do not include, for example, a housemate explaining that she didn’t eat the food you left in the fridge, even though it was *clearly* labeled. All items must be falsifiable: in other words, they can be shown to be false with evidence. Pieces of opinion should not be included. Moreover, items in your inventory should present themselves as truthful. In other words, please do not include pieces of satire, such as articles from *The Onion*.



Your **inventory** must describe 10 particular pieces of disinformation you have encountered. How you represent these is up to you (excel sheet; graphic novel; word document; diary; whatever). But you should find a way of discussing some or all of the following questions: What is it? What does it want us to believe? Why? Motives? How did you find it? How do you know it’s false? Did you try to correct it? Does it confirm or challenge your beliefs?

The **reflection** must be 1,200–1,500 words. It should discuss: 1) How does the inventory reflect your exposure to information? Are you suffering from selective exposure? 2) Is this disinformation harmful? To whom and how? Did these items provoke any emotions? 3) How do these items relate to material we’ve discussed in class so far?



ENCYCLOPEDIA ENTRIES (30%)

Our course will create a public encyclopedia of fake news (name TBD) which will be published online through Wordpress. Each student will be responsible for creating three 800-1,000-word entries. Your first post will discuss a recent (i.e., in the last ten years) piece of “fake news” or bullshit. Your second will discuss a historical (i.e., more than ten years ago) piece of bullshit. Your third will discuss a conspiracy theory.

For each of these entries, I will generate a list of possible starting points. You may also propose a topic of your choice. However, you may *not* choose the same topic as any other student.

Each entry will be based on your own research, using methods we will discuss in class. I will offer ideas and guidance for research. You should cite sources. When you turn in your entry, I will respond with a list of revisions. You must complete these revisions in order to receive a grade for the assignment.

You should also include a snappy title, an open-source image, and a promotional tweet. You may choose to publish the blog post under your full name, your initials, or as “anonymous.” While these blog posts will be relatively succinct, I expect them to be well-researched, thoughtfully composed, and carefully written. Entries will be graded on the quality of writing (including its accessibility to a popular audience), the strength of the research, and adherence to the guidelines listed above and in class.



OP-ED (15%)

An “op-ed” is a piece of opinion-based commentary published in a newspaper or magazine. It is called an “op-ed,” because it traditionally appeared on the *opposite* page from the *editorial* section of the newspaper. Scholars, politicians, and all kinds of experts often write op-eds in order to comment on current events. You will be reading many op-eds throughout this class.

You will compose an 800–1,000-word op-ed of your own that includes an original argument relating to the themes we have discussed in our class: disinformation, “fake news,” media history, etc. It should be intended to help us to understand current events or our present in some way. Should you wish, you may publish this on our blog. This assignment will include several parts: (1) Proposal, due Nov. 19. (2) Draft, due Nov. 26. (3) Final submission, due Dec. 17.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Note: most readings are available on Moodle;
linked readings are available online. I will give
you notice if I change any readings on this
schedule.



UNIT 1: THE FAKE NEWS PROBLEM

Sept. 5: Course introduction: Iber, ["History in an Age of Fake News,"](#) (2018). (in-class reading)

Sept. 10: Fake News, Disinformation, or Bullshit? Read: Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," (1986); Owen, ["College students broadly mistrust news. Fake Kardashian gossip probably won't help,"](#) NeimanLab, (2018).

Sept. 12: Cognitive Error and Selective Exposure. Read: Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, excerpt; Roberts, ["America is facing an epistemic crisis,"](#) Vox (2017).

Sept. 17: The Fact Check. Read: Graves, "Anatomy of a Fact Check"; FactCheck.org, ["Our Process,"](#); Cook and Lewandowsky, "Debunking Handbook."

Sept. 19: Web literacy: Caulfield, ["Cynicism, Not Gullibility, Will Kill Our Humanity,"](#) (2018). Read: Caulfield, ["Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers,"](#) **Due: Meeting with instructor.**



UNIT 2: DEMOCRACY AND INFORMATION

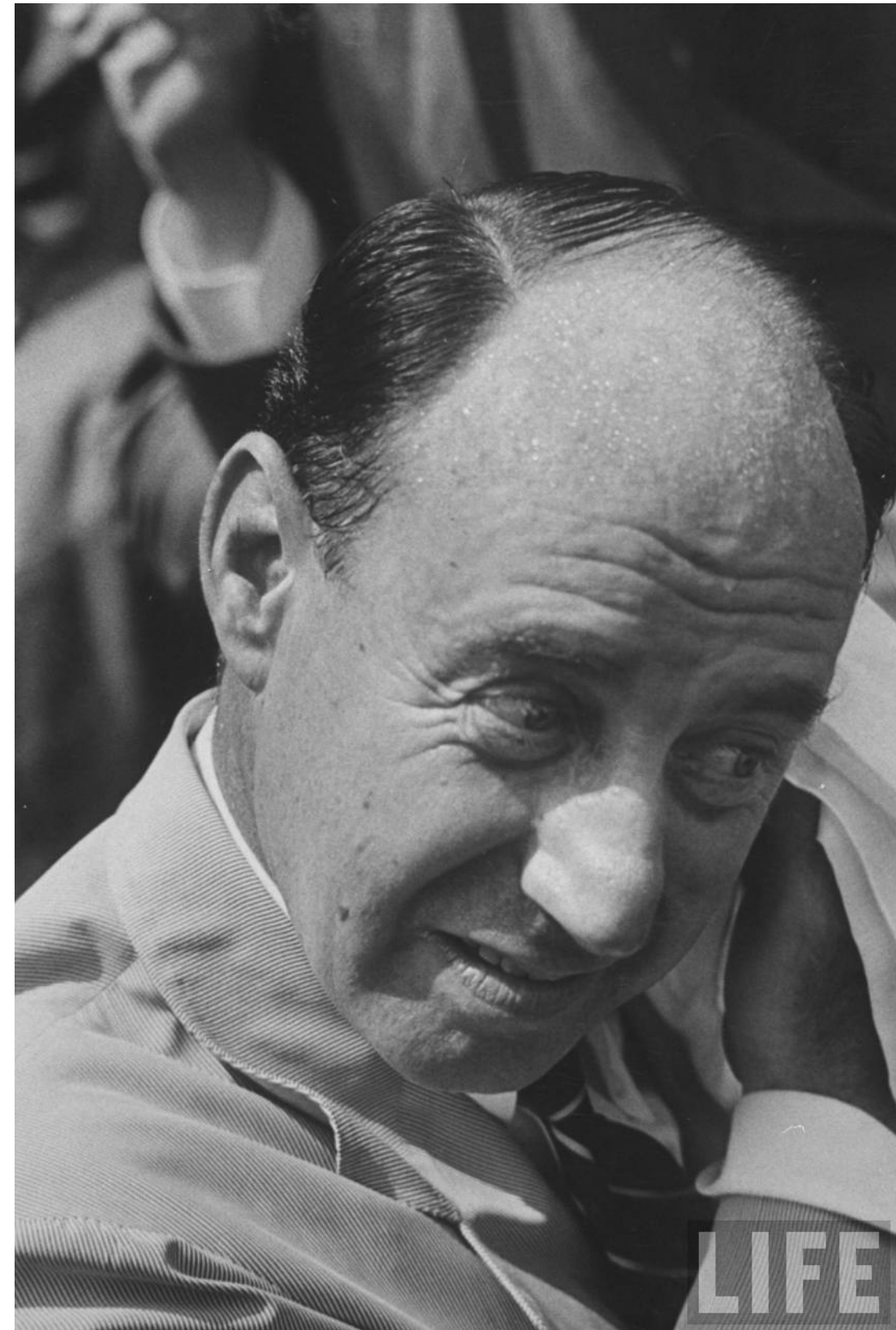
Sept. 24: Politics and Fake News. Read: Arendt, "Truth and Politics" (1967). Rosenfeld, introduction, ch. 1, *Democracy and Truth* (2019). **Due: Journal #1.**

Sept. 26: Expertise and Anti-Intellectualism. Read: Rosenfeld, ch. 2 and 3 from *Democracy and Truth* (2019). Read: Nichols, ["The Death of Expertise,"](#) (2017). **Due: Information inventory and reflection.**

Oct. 1: Post-Truth? Read: Hanlon, ["Postmodernism didn't cause Trump. It explains him,"](#) (2018). Rosenfeld, chapter 4 from *Democracy and Truth* (2019). Rosenfeld, ["The Only Thing More Dangerous Than Trump's Appeal to Common Sense Is His Dismissal of It,"](#) (2017).

Oct. 3: Writing workshop. Due: Encyclopedia entry #1

Oct. 8: Epistemic Injustice. Read: Tsosie, "Indigenous Peoples, Anthropology, and the Legacy of Epistemic Injustice," (2017). Dickerson, ["How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down,"](#) (2017). Weiss, ["The Limits of 'Believe All Women,'"](#) (2017).





UNIT 3: FAKE NEWS AND EARLY MEDIA

Oct. 10: Media. Read: Postman, "The Medium is the Metaphor," and "Media as Epistemology," *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). **Due: Journal #2.**

Oct. 12: Autumn Recess

Oct. 17: Rumor. Read: Dowd, introduction, ch. 1, from *Groundless* (2015). Scribner, "Diving into Mysterious Waters" (2018).

Oct. 22: Gossip. Read: Norton, "Gossip and the Essex County Witchcraft Crisis of 1692," (2014). Ball, "'Gadding,' 'Gainsaying,' and Negotiating Gossip in the Antebellum Black Press," (2014).

Oct. 24: The Early American Press. Read: Dowd, ch. 8 and 9, from *Groundless* (2015). Read: Parkinson, ["Fake News? That's a very old story,"](#) (2016). Will Slauter, "Forward-Looking Statements," (2009).

UNIT 4: FAKE NEWS AND MODERN MEDIA

Oct. 29: Journalism and Objectivity. Read: Young, ["Moon Shot,"](#) (2017). Tucher, "The True, the False, and the 'Not Exactly Lying,'" (2013). Read: Hemmer, "From 'Faith in Facts' to 'Fair and Balanced'" (2017). Hemmer, ["The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History,"](#) (2014). **Due: Journal #3.**

Oct. 31: Mass Media. Postman, "The Peek-a-Boo World," "The Age of Show Business," and "Now... This," from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). Garber, ["Are We Having too Much Fun?"](#) (2017).

Nov. 5: Media Consolidation. Watch: *Network* (1976). Read: Herman and Chomsky, "The Propaganda Model," (1988). Read: vanden Heuvel, ["Bernie Sanders has a smart critique of corporate media bias,"](#) (2019). **Due: Encyclopedia entry #2.**

Nov. 7: Otelia Cromwell Day.

Nov. 12: Fragmentation and New Media. Read: Zelizer, "How Washington Helped Create the Contemporary Media." Kruse and Zelizer, ["How Policy Decisions Spawned Today's Hyperpolarized Media."](#) Listen: *Radiolab*, ["Breaking News."](#) (transcript on site). **Due: Op-ed proposal.**



UNIT 5: CULTURES OF FAKE NEWS

Nov. 14: Economies of Falsehood. Read: Subramanian, [“Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex,”](#) (2017). Watch: *Merchants of Doubt* (2014). Explore: [Made by History](#). **Due: Journal #4.**

Nov. 19: Conspiracy. Read: Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” Browse: [List of conspiracy theories](#).

Nov. 21: Conspiracy. Read: Uscinski and Parent, “A Theory of Conspiracy,” (2014). Dickey, [“Climb Aboard, Ye Who Seek the Truth!”](#) (2016). Brooks, [“Conspiracy theories are a dangerous threat to our democracy,”](#) (2019).

Nov. 26: Writing workshop #2. Due: Op-ed draft.

Dec. 3: Fake History. Lipstadt, “Canaries in the Mine,” (1994). Lipstadt, [“The Trump Administration’s Flirtation with Holocaust Denial,”](#) *The Atlantic* (2017). **Due: Encyclopedia entry #3.**

Dec. 5: Fake Science? Watch: *Behind the Curve* (2019). Read: Rothstein, “Vaccines and Their Critics, Then and Now,” *New Atlantis* (2015). Kovaka, [“Climate change denial and beliefs about science,”](#) (2019).





UNIT 6: MAKING CHANGE

Dec. 10: Regulation? Participation? Read: Appelbaum, [“Regulate Social Media Now. The Future of Democracy is at Stake,”](#) (2019). Dolnick, [“The Man Who Knew Too Little,”](#) (2018). Wulf, [“Could footnotes be the key to winning the disinformation wars?”](#) (2019). **Due: Journal #5.**

Dec. 12: Reform? Read: Rini, [“How to Fix Fake News,”](#) *New York Times* (2018). [“Our Ten Founding Principles,”](#) *The Correspondent*. Pope Francis, [“Fake News and Journalism for Peace”](#) (2018). **Send me a reading by noon today.**

Dec. 17: Op-ed due, 11:59pm.