

Echo Chambers, Fake News, Conspiracy Theories and Memes: Critical Thinking and Social Media

Course Description

It used to be that we used social media solely to share cute pictures and amusing anecdotes. Many of us now form beliefs about politics and society based on ideas from articles, posts, memes and infographics we see on social media. We go on to argue with friends and strangers alike about these ideas, miffed at how they don't see things the same way we do, and lucky to make it out of these interactions without a fight that ends in frustration, hurt feelings and a sense that you and they don't occupy the same world. Rather than despair, this course will view these interactions as opportunities to improve our critical thinking skills and to raise some philosophical questions about the sources of our disagreement.

Section 1: Echo Chambers, Fake News and Media Bias

This section will explore the challenge that algorithmically tailored feeds and media bias pose to our ability to develop into thoughtful and well-informed persons. Besides discussing strategies that directly address these challenges, we will also use such challenges to motivate a shift towards learning about rhetorical devices, informal fallacies and the basics of constructing and evaluating valid arguments.

Potential Readings

C. Thi Nguyen: <https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult>

C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"

Amandine Catala, "Echo Chambers, Epistemic Injustice, and Ignorance"

Hanna Gunn, "Filter bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online Communities"

Megan Fritts & Frank Cabrera, "Fake News and Epistemic Vice: Combating a Uniquely Noxious Market"

Brooke Moore & Richard Parker, "Critical Thinking" (selected chapters on rhetoric, ambiguity, informal fallacies and media bias and credibility)

Wireless Philosophy (videos on necessary and sufficient conditions, validity, soundness, truth, implicit premises and various informal fallacies)

Philosophy bites interview with Miranda Fricker on Epistemic Injustice

Section 2: Cancel Culture and De-platforming

In this section, we will explore under what conditions, if any, it is appropriate for a person to suffer loss of status, loss of employment and/or to be barred from engaging in certain kinds of public discourse due to either perceived morally problematic behavior or the possession of potentially dangerous or controversial ideas. This will then be used to scaffold discussions surrounding free speech, punishment and norms of discourse in the context of significant disagreement.

Potential Readings

Andrew Cohen, "Harms of Silence"

Neil Levy, "Why no Platforming is sometimes a justifiable position"

Anna Akana: Why we can't accept cancel culture (video)

Contrapoints: Canceling (video)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/middlebury-free-speech-violence/518667/>

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2019/01/i-was-no-platformed-heres-why-its->

[counterproductive](#)

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/10/21/williams-students-revoke-invitation-speaker-who-criticizes-feminism>

Section 3: Conspiracy Theories

In this section, we will consider the proliferation of conspiracy theories on social media. We will explore questions such as, why do conspiracy theories seem to gain so much ground on social media? What exactly *is* a conspiracy theory and is there something bad about believing in conspiracy theories (regardless of whether they turn out to be true)? We will then consider whether there exist any formal tools that can help us evaluate how confident we should be in the truth or falsity of a particular conspiracy theory and/or that allow us to isolate what has potentially gone wrong in conspiracy theory thinking. This final component of the section will focus on mathematical tools, such as bayesianism and likelihoodism, that enable us to adjudicate between competing hypotheses in a formal way.

Potential Readings

Quassim Cassam, “Conspiracy Theories”

Quassim Cassam: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>

Megan Fritts & Frank Cabrera, “Online Misinformation and “Phantom Patterns”: Epistemic Exploitation in the Era of Big Data”

Cristian Calude & Giuseppe Longo, “The Deluge of Spurious Correlations in Big Data”

M R. X. Dentith, “Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of the Evidence”

Elliott Sober, “Evidence and Evolution” (Chapters on Bayesianism and Likelihoodism)

Wireless Philosophy (videos on Bayesianism)

Section 4: Infographics and Memes

This section of the course will explore the way that misleadingly constructed infographics and cleverly crafted memes can result in us forming beliefs that often lack evidence or justification. The first part of the section will focus on learning how to evaluate information presented to us in infographics by learning how to properly make inductive generalizations from samples, and the kind of things that might threaten such generalizations. The second part of the section will turn to memes that attempt to make a point or convince you of a claim. We will try to understand these memes as a type of analogical argument and then ask under what conditions such an argument can be considered a *good* argument.

Potential Readings

Wesley Salmon, “Arguments Based on Samples”

Brooke Moore & Richard Parker, “Critical Thinking” (selected chapters on Forming and Confirming Causal Hypotheses)

Stan Baronett, “Logic” (selected chapters on Scientific Arguments and Analogical Arguments)

Wireless Philosophy (videos on Correlation and Causation and Post Hoc fallacy)