

NEWS VS. TRUTH
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A multidisciplinary exploration into the growing mistrust of mainstream media, increasingly siloed sources of information, and disagreement about fundamental facts.

This study group will examine media controversies, while considering the cognitive processes by which the brain develops and maintains belief systems, even in the face of contrary evidence. Featuring guest lectures from practitioners of objective reporting, opinion journalism, and partisan rhetoric; as well as from Professor Steven Sloman from the Department of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences.

The proposed format is four two-hour sessions, featuring brief lectures followed by discussion. Guest lecturers will present for 15-20 minutes, followed by moderated Q&A with students. In addition to reading assignments, students will be expected to watch, read or listen to examples of news coverage that illustrate the theme of each session, and prepare a comment or question about it.

The study group will follow an arc that begins with the norms of traditional journalism - encountering those who adhere to and violate them; then delve into how humans decide what is true; and finally examine how politicians, public relations professionals, and social media practitioners (legitimate and otherwise) leverage psychology to sway opinion.

1. NEWS VS. OPINION (aka Being There vs. Talking About It)

What differentiates on-the-ground news reporting from fact-based analysis and partisan exhortation? What are the norms of objective reporting, and its limits?

With guest lecturer Anderson Cooper, CNN.

Assigned readings will include selections from:

- Reporter, by Seymour Hersh (autobiography of the famed investigative reporter)
- Bias, by Bernard Goldberg (former CBS News correspondent makes a case for bias in mainstream newsrooms)
- The Loudest Voice in the Room, by Gabriel Sherman (unauthorized biography of Fox News founder Roger Ailes)
- PressThink blog (Jay Rosen) (the intersection of journalism and society)

2. HOW DO WE "KNOW" WHAT IS TRUE? (Prof. Steven Sloman, Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences)

The psychology behind what we believe and why we cling to it. Is group identity and emotion more important than facts? With examples drawn from current events, and prescriptions for a less polarized, better-informed society.

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- The Knowledge Illusion, by Steven Sloman & Philip Fernbach

3. USING THE NEWS

The business of manipulating public opinion – overtly through public relations campaigns and delegitimizing mainstream news outlets; subtly through the symbiosis of journalists and their subjects (as evidenced by the annual White House Correspondents Dinner and the deals struck between celebrities and the tabloids who cover them).

Guest lecturers may include:

- Tammy Haddad, Washington fixer
- Larry Hackett, former editor in chief, People magazine
- Michael Nyman, Chairman, PMK*BNC Public Relations
- Lisa Caputo '86, former press secretary, First Lady Hillary Clinton
- Kay Madati, head of media, Twitter

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- This Town, by Mark Leibovich (Washington's strange bedfellows, political and journalistic)
- Fire and Fury, by Michael Wolff (insider accounts of the Trump White House)

4. CREATING AND DETECTING FAKE NEWS

The state of the art in both disseminating and identifying fake news. What are the limitations of technological solutions, and how much depends upon the public's willingness and ability to develop new news consumption habits? Does it help or hurt that some Americans get so much of their "news" from non-journalistic sources like late-night comedians?

Guest lecturers may include:

- Campbell Brown, Facebook head of news partnerships
- Kay Madati, head of media, Twitter
- Emily Lazar, former Executive Producer, The Colbert Report & The Late Show
- Jay Khurana, Brown '19, co-founder of CrossCheck, a Nelson Center B-Lab startup for detecting fake news

Assigned reading will include selections from:

- The Four, by Scott Galloway (the DNA of Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Apple)
- The Stewart/Colbert Effect, edited by Amarnath Amarasingam (essays on the impact of comedians shaping public opinion)

The study group will meet Mondays from 2-3:50 in Room 110 at the Watson Institute, Stephen Robert Hall, 280 Brook Street.

The group will meet on February 11 and 25, and March 4 and 11.