The Information Crisis: Social Media, Fake News, and Generative AI [DRAFT]

Course Level: Mid-to-Upper

[Semester], [Institution]

Description & Overview

Upon entering the digital age, humans became inundated with information like never before. We could suddenly access swathes of knowledge about various topics – knowledge that was, often, previously restricted to archives, libraries, and other research-oriented institutions. Yet the ease with which this information could be published and disseminated also exacerbated (and plausibly generated) problems relating to our navigation of our epistemic environments. Questions regarding the reliability of information sources were compounded by the sheer number of them. And technological advances in machine learning and generative AI have complicated matters further.

This course thus serves as a philosophical introduction to what we might call "the information crisis." It situates contemporary discourses over information in broader theorizing about humans' informational needs and how these needs were thought to be satisfied. By applying this theorizing to debates over fake news, social media, and generative AI, students will come to appreciate the philosophical complexity of these issues, and will therefore be prepared to question the role of these continuing and emerging technologies in civic communication.

The course is divided into three units. The first unit tackles the informational problems that are inherent to large communities. Here, we'll ask what it means to be a knower and what kinds of institutions and practices are required to enable our participation in public life. The second then transitions to social media, fake news, and epistemic bubbles. We'll specifically explore what enables the spread of misinformation in online environments and whether these mechanisms are unequivocally bad. Finally, the third unit looks to non-agential influences in our information diet: namely, recommender algorithms and generative AI programs. As we'll see, one of the major questions is how we can hold such technologies accountable in how they produce and disseminate information.

Course Information

Instructor:
C.J. Oswald
[Email]

Lecture:
[Location]
[Time]

Office Hours:
[Location]
[Time]

Readings:
Course Packet

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Identify our inherent limits as knowers and explain the philosophical problems that emerge from this
- Describe how our informational needs beget special problems when applied to large communities
- Examine the ways in which social media (in both individual use and in their design) can exacerbate the dissemination of fake news and misinformation; further evaluate proposed means of remedying the situation

- Explain how generative AI programs raise philosophical issues relating to authorship, explainability, and thus accountability.
- Apply various philosophical methodologies in critically approaching both how to characterize and ameliorate the information crisis
- Charitably interpret, reconstruct, and evaluate a variety of philosophical arguments
- Better navigate, and appreciate, intellectual discomfort and uncertainty in thinking through hard questions of deep public importance

General Course Policies

Syllabus Policy: I think of syllabi as pseudo-contracts between myself and students. Consequently, the policies, requirements, and guidelines listed throughout should be read as promises made to students about what they can expect from the course. However, as instructor, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus as needed to best achieve the course learning objectives. Students will be promptly informed—and likely consulted—regarding any such changes.

Email and Communications: All course announcements will be posted on the course website. However, to contact me individually, the best way will be through email. I plan on responding to all emails within **2 business days** (so excluding weekends and holidays). If you haven't received a response after that period, please feel free to follow up.

Office Hours: Office hours are times set aside and dedicated for meeting with students. You're welcome (and encouraged!) to drop by and discuss whatever you need or want to. Often, students come prepared with questions regarding the course material, assignments, or grades. Yet I'm also happy to discuss philosophy, university life, and related topics. By attending office hours, you can receive more personalized instruction, feedback, and even advice on both the course and being a student. So please don't hesitate to use them!

Screens (and In-Class Materials): Evidence is mounting that the use of digital technologies or "screens" (e.g., laptops, phones, tablets) in educational settings hinders learning. These technologies distract both you and your classmates, preventing you from both attending to the material during class and, accordingly, from absorbing and reflecting on it. So, this will be a **screens-free** classroom: the use of screens within the classroom is prohibited. However, since printing is often costly, I will provide handouts for class discussion. If students require a laptop or tablet for **accessibility** reasons, please inform me as soon as possible.

Grading, Requirements, and Assignment Policies

AI and Original Work: Much of philosophy's value stems from practicing it. By doing philosophy, we contribute to a collective intellectual project while also enhancing and refining our capacities for rational thought, communication, and so on. That is, there's value in doing the work independent of material outcomes (e.g., grades, jobs, etc.). As such, I require all students to submit their own, original work. The use of either generative AI programs (e.g., chatbots and other LLMs) or AI tools that significantly shape the writing (e.g., Grammarly) is therefore prohibited. If, for whatever reason, I suspect submitted work may not be your own, I may invite you for an interview regarding both the material and process. This interview will be treated as an oral examination counting for **50%** of your grade on the relevant assignment.

Revisions and Resubmissions: We learn and improve most when we have opportunities to correct--what we come to learn are--our mistakes. To facilitate this, students are granted **five** opportunities to revise and resubmit their work in light of my feedback. This policy applies to the following assignments: Reading Annotations, In-Class Quizzes, and In-Class Exams.

Late/Missing Assignments and Extensions: Students are expected to submit all assignments by their designated deadline. Late submissions for homework assignments are subject to the removal of one opportunity for revising and resubmitting an assignment. However, I'm fairly lenient in granting extensions for out-of-class assignments and make-ups. So long as I'm asked within a reasonable time frame (e.g., not a few hours before the deadline), I'll typically grant an extension, the length of which will depend on student circumstances.

Grading Scheme:

A+	99-100
A	93-98.9
A-	90-92.9
B+	87-89.9
B	83-86.9

B-	80-82.9
C+	77-79.9
C	73-76.9
C-	70-72.9
D+	67-69.9

D	63-66.9
D-	60-62.9
F	0-59

Assignments: Below are the assignments that students will complete for this course, along with their corresponding weight.

Class Attendance & Participation (10%): Becoming more comfortable with philosophy requires active participation, so mere attendance will not suffice for learning the relevant material. As such, you're expected to have completed the readings before class and be prepared to discuss them. Relevant passages via handouts will be provided for you during class. If you need to miss class for whatever reason, please simply let me know ahead of time.

Reading Annotations (15%): For each unit, students must submit two reading annotations (**six total**). For these, students will annotate a hard copy of an assigned reading, including highlighting or underlining relevant parts of the text in addition to marginal comments. Annotations are thus an opportunity for students to practice their close reading skills in a non-digital format.

In-Class Quizzes (15%): Throughout the semester, students will complete **six** quizzes on the course content and assigned readings. These quizzes will be distributed at toward the end of a given class and are to be completed within the remaining time. In this way, the quizzes are designed to elicit reflection on the central content and themes of the corresponding class while further solidifying student understanding therein. They will typically consist of two or three short-form questions, which can be answered in a few (3-5) sentences each.

In-Class Exams (45%)*:* Students will complete **three** in-class exams (one per unit). Each exam will consist of around five or six prompts, from which students must answer **two** (a short essay for each). Typically, the prompts will ask students to synthesize, interpret, and analyze the material from the previous weeks. For example, a prompt may ask students to address how a given author's view handles a tricky case or the extent to which two authors really disagree with one another. In this respect, students are assessing the corresponding strengths and weaknesses of the authors' arguments by determining the limits of their application and exploring relevant nuances.

Final Exam (15%): For the final assignment, students will complete an in-person exam. Unlike the regular exams, this one will involve students writing a single argumentative essay that addresses some of the questions we've looked at in the semester. Students will be able to select from a small pool of prompts, each of which asks them to take a stand on some issue (e.g., whether recommender systems, as they currently exist, really inhibit our ability to gather knowledge). Essays will be assessed in terms of clarity, organization, and depth of argumentation.

Course Topics, Readings, and Schedule

Topic	Week	Day	Readings	Assignments
Course Introduction	1	1	No Reading	
Unit 1: Information Problems in Large Societies				
Imperfect Knowers	1	2	Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* - Ch. 1: The World Outside and the Picture in Our Heads	
The Need for Testimony: Dividing Epistemic Labor	2	3	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* - Ch. 3: The State of Nature: A Rough Guide	
The Need for Testimony: Testimonial Exchange	2	4	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* - Ch. 4: Truth, Assertion, and Belief	*Quiz 1*
On Being Informed: A Right to Information?	3	5	Rubén Marciel, "On citizens' right to information: Justification and analysis of the democratic right to be well informed"	
On Being Informed: Practical Costs	3	6	Adam F. Gibbons, "Political ignorance is both rational and radical"	
In-Class Exam 1	4	7	N/A	*Exam 1*
News and Journalism: The Hesitant Perspective	4	8	Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* Part 7: Newspapers (Ch. 21-24: pgs. 201-232)	
News and Journalism: Begrudging Endorsement?	5	9	John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* - Ch. 5: "Search for the Great Community"	*Quiz 2*
Unit 2: Fake News, Epistemic Bubbles, and Social Media				

Fake News & Misinformation: The Badness of Fake News	5	10	Simone Chambers, "Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?"	
Fake News & Misinformation: Epistemic Partisanship	6	11	Regina Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology"	
Fake News & Misinformation: Free Speech	6	12	Étienne Brown, "Free Speech and the Legal Prohibition of Fake News"	*Quiz 3*
Bubbles & Echo Chambers: The Basic Idea	7	13	C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"	*Exam 1 Revisions*
Bubbles & Echo Chambers: Good Bubbles?	7	14	Meredith Sheeks, "The Myth of the Good Epistemic Bubble"	
In-Class Exam 2	8	15	N/A	*Exam 2*
Bubbles & Echo Chambers: Good Bubbles?	8	16	Alper Güngör, "Echo Chambers and Friendship"	
Online Discourse: Does Context Matter?	9	17	Karen Frost-Arnold, "The Epistemic Dangers of Context Collapse Online"	
Online Discourse: Anonymity	9	18	Veronica Ivy, "Yikkity Yak, Who Said That? The Epistemology of Anonymous Assertions"	*Quiz 4*
Unit 3: Recommender Algorithms and Generative AI				
Recommender Algorithms: How They Work	10	19	Mark Alfano, Amir Ebrahimi Fard, Adam Carter, Peter Clutton, and Colin Klein, "Technologically Scaffolded Atypical Cognition: The Case of YouTube's Recommender System"	
Recommender Algorithms: How They Work	10	20	Alfano et al. ""Technologically Scaffolded Atypical Cognition: The Case of YouTube's Recommender System" (cont.)	
Recommender Algorithms: A Fix?	11	21	Susan Kennedy, "Algorithmic Recommender Systems"	*Exam 2 Revisions*

Recommender Algorithms: Democracy	11	22	Thomas Christiano, "Algorithms, Manipulation, and Democracy"	
Recommender Algorithms: Democracy	12	23	Étienne Brown, "Democracy Needs Reach: Political Equality, Online Speech, and Algorithmic Recommendation"	*Quiz 5*
In-Class Exam 3	12	24	N/A	*Exam 3*
Generative AI: The Basic Issues	13	25	Michael Townsen Hicks, James Humphries, and Joe Slater, "ChatGPT is Bullshit"	
Generative AI: The Basic Issues	13	26	Robin McKenna, "Sophistry on Steroids? The Ethics, Epistemology and Politics of Persuasive AI"	
AI & Accountability: Authorship	14	27	Tamer Nawar, "Generative Artificial Intelligence and Authorship Gaps"	
AI & Accountability: Authorship	14	28	René van Woudenberg, Chris Ranalli, and Daniel Bracker, "Authorship and ChatGPT: A Conservative View"	*Quiz 6*
AI & Accountability: Transparency & Explainability	15	29	Sam Baron, "Trust, Explainability, and AI"	
AI & Accountability: Transparency & Explainability	15	30	Ning Fan, "Explainability is Necessary for AI's Trustworthiness"	*Exam 3 Revisions*