Teaching Rhetorical Praxis in a Post-Truth World: An Undergraduate Course on Detecting and Analyzing Bullshit, Fake News, and Alternative Facts

Maureen Daly Goggin, PhD
Professor, Department of English
Arizona State University

Abstract. We are living in an era where reality, truth, and facts are being turned upside down and inside out. Fake news and falsehoods are being spewed out in increasing exponential rates. I was prompted to do something about the propensity of fake news through post-truth discourse and designed an undergraduate course that I titled: Bullshit, Fake News, and Alternative Facts. In this piece, I critically reflect on and share my theoretical frames for constructing the course, the design of it, my experience in teaching it, and report on a survey about the class—and I call all of you to work at least some material on post-truth into your classes or into a full course as I have.

> [A]s the vilest writer has his readers, so the greatest liar has his believers; and it often happens, that if a lie be believed only for an hour, it has done its work, and there is no farther occasion for it. Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it; so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale has had its effect.
>
> --Jonathan Swift (1710)

We are living in an era where reality, truth, and facts are being turned upside down and inside out. One of the signs of this dizzying state is the increasing use of two neologisms: fake news and alternative facts. They join with an early 20th century term, bullshit. We can think of these and other terms as moving along a continuum from truth to an ambivalence to truth to mainly falsehoods to outright lies. Along this continuum we find everything from satires to hoaxes to misinformation to counterfeit news stories to propaganda to alternative facts. Satires, which range from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" to Onion stories like "NFL to Curb Excessive Celebrations by Removing Areas of Players' Brains Responsible for Emotions" to episodes of The Daily Show, offer humorous exaggerations to expose and criticize people and governments. Counterfeit news stories, though, are malicious fabrications created usually for political ends. Nazi propaganda of WWII and fraudulent stories such as "Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump," a story that went viral on Facebook, are intended to mislead readers. Although counterfeit news has been around since ancient times (Octavia used disinformation to win over Marc Anthony in the last war of the Roman Republic), the internet and social media have led to a huge increase in false news, seriously challenging and muddying "real" news. Each fake story can rapidly multiply over social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter and through email, sometimes with devastating effects. Consider the Pizzagate shooter in Washington, DC

in December 2016, [1] for instance. As readers, students need to be able to detect whether or not a story or an argument is fake. As writers, if they cite a counterfeit story as evidence, they risk harming their credibility. And if they are taken in by a fake story, they can risk so much more. Given the current precarious state of truth, I was prompted to do something about the propensity of fake news through post-truth discourse and designed an undergraduate course that I titled Bullshit, Fake News, and Alternative facts. In this piece, I critically reflect on and share my frame for constructing the course, the design of it, and my experience in teaching it, and report on a survey students filled out after the completion of the course—and I call all of you to work at least some of this type of material on post-truth into your classes or into a full course as I have.

Post-Truth

As Swift (1710) observed three centuries ago, lies hold sway before truth can be released. Post-truth promulgates various levels of mistruths. After much research and debate, the Oxford English Dictionary selected "post-truth" as the word of 2016. Post-truth (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019) relates to or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Rhetoricians, like myself, might interrogate this definition arguing that "objective facts" are illusionary and all rhetoric contains emotional appeals no matter how reasoned it may be. Pathos and ethos are inescapable. We can recuperate the definition by arguing that post-truth is a statement that rests on a lopsided rhetorical triangle—mostly absent of logos or reasoning, of facts as well as of ethos or ethical positioning, of ethical discourse, to rely primarily on a skewed pathos. In short, post-truth discourse is best understood as unethical, as falsehoods absent of facts, and as prejudiced pathos. Why is this important? It demands critical reflection to detect such falsehoods.

I teach and engage in critical reflection—a "meaning-making process"—that allows me to set goals to use what I've learned in the past to inform what I do in the future. As John Dewey (1929) taught us, it is the link between thinking and doing. Maura Sellars (2013) also grapples with Dewey's theory of reflection; in it she turns to the theory on reflection developed by Schon (1983) to argue he

> introduces some new ideas on the reflective process itself, most especially on the implication in Dewey's (1933) theory that reflection is necessarily a process embarked on after the event, is a long, ponderous undertaking and also on the content of reflection itself. Schon (1983, 1987, 1991) suggests two levels of reflection: (i) reflection in-action and (ii) reflection-on-action, partly based on Dewey's (1933) work. … Schon (1983) offers an interesting departure

[1] Pizzagate was a conspiracy theory that alleged Hillary Clinton and other democrats operated a child sex and sacrifice ring out of Comet Ping Pong Pizza's shop in Washington D.C. The conspiracy went viral in 2016. A young man, Edgar Maddison Welch, answered Alex Jones's impassioned pleas that someone personally investigate this story; he did more than investigate. He entered the pizza shop on December 4, 2016 armed with a loaded AR-15 style rifle at about 3:00 pm and shot three rounds off in the pizza shop. He was apprehended shortly afterwards.

> from the perception that problems for reflection are necessarily reflected upon after the event. He suggests that reflection-in-action is a concept that celebrates the art of teaching, in that it allows for continual interpretation, investigation and reflective conversation with oneself about the problem while employing the information gained from past experiences to inform and guide new actions. (pp. 4-5)

In this piece, I focus on reflection-on-action though, while I was teaching the course, I certainly performed reflection-in-action during and after every class. And to teach critical reflection, I drew on two theoretical frames as I outline below. These gave me goals to reach for and substance to reflect on as I thought about the class both during its run and afterwards.

Workplace Success and Framework for Success in Post-secondary Writing

I used two frameworks as the theoretical grounding for the course: Top Ten Skills for Workplace Success (Curtin, 2017), and the Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators [CWPA], National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], & National Writing Project [NWP], 2011). The first frame offers the following ten habits of mind based on a survey of 350 executives across 9 industries worldwide that are predicted to be necessary by 2020 for all kinds of careers:

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinatizing with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

What is clear in this ten-point list is that course content knowledge—the kind dispensed in specific disciplines such as business or engineering or sciences—did not make the list. Instead these habits are critical thinking and reflection skills typically taught in the humanities courses. For me, these habits of mind are also critical for solving all kinds of challenges beyond the workplace, and, most importantly, those that contribute to a critical democratic citizenship. For as John Dewey (1954) taught us, the concept of critical democracy engages the interdependent relationship among democracy, the state, and the public. Critical thinking skills—those at the center of humanities classes—are necessary to fully engage in these three.

The second theoretical frame, The Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing "describes the rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success" (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011, p. 1). The framework was developed by two-year and four-year college instructors as well as high-school English teachers from around the country. Although the habits of mind are intended primarily to develop student success in college, I find the framework also crucial for developing critical democratic citizen success—something necessary within and beyond college.

The framework distinguishes 8 habits of mind for student success:

1. Curiosity: the desire to know more about the world.
2. Openness: the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
3. Engagement: a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
4. Creativity: the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
5. Persistence: the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
6. Responsibility: the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
7. Flexibility: the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
8. Metacognition: the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge. (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011, p. 1)

These habits of mind resonate with the Top Ten Skills for Workplace Success and were central to the reading and writing assignments I designed as well as a range of in-class activities in my course. Although the Framework for Success was designed primarily for writing classes, I found it rich and powerful for my rhetorical analysis class, and indeed worthy for any humanities course. I informed students of the recommended workplace skills and habits of mind, explaining how they guided my creation of the course and how both were heuristics for critical democratic citizenship beyond school. I will return to these in my description of the class and the assignments to show how they informed what I did.

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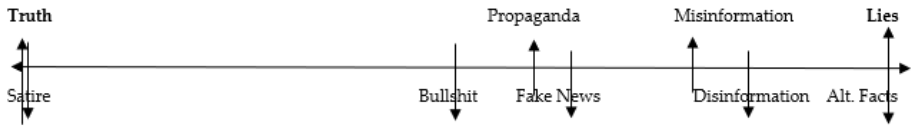
Truth-Lie Continuum

I designed the topics of the course around what I called and touch on above, a Truth to Lie continuum of rhetorics:



These seven rhetorics fall along the continuum according to their concern for truth moving from absolute truth to flat out lies. The continuum begins with satire, a genre that must be close to truth to be successful. Satirist Jon Stewart explains of his experience in the *Daily Show* "We don't fact check, look into context, because of any kind of journalistic criterion that we feel has to be met; we do that because jokes don't work when they are lies" (qtd. in Duffy, 2014 p. 75). As William Duffy (2014) points

out, "*The Daily Show* might be a "fake" news show, but to echo Jeffrey Jones, 'being fake does not mean that the information it imparts is untrue. Indeed, as with most social and political satire, its humor offers a means of reestablishing common-sense truths to counter spectacle, ritual, pageantry, artifice, and verbosity that often cloak the powerful'" (p. 183). Truth is the soul of satire.

As we move along the continuum, Bullshit, according to Harry Frankfurt (2005) who wrote the book on bullshit, is indifferent to truth and lies and so resides in the middle.[2] In Frankfurt's (1986) words, "It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth — this indifference to how things really are — that I regard as of the essence of bullshit." (p. 8-9). The liar cares about deflecting from truth whereas the bullshitter cares less about truth or lies. The BS artist also cares little for the audience in the crafting of the bullshit. As Frankfurt (1986) points out, "bullshit itself is invariably produced in a careless or self-indulgent manner, that it is never finely crafted, that in the making of it there is never the meticulously attentive concern with detail" (p. 5). Moving along the continuum, propaganda—as biased information issued to promote a particular stance—can be issued for both good and bad ends. Think of WWII propaganda that denigrates and dehumanizes the enemy at one end and propaganda such as Uncle Sam's "I want you" posters that call to its citizens to join the war efforts at the other end. Fake news can be totally or partially false or ignorant of truth. Although fake news has been around at least since ancient times, it has spiked in usage with the various technological inventions of communication throughout history. The invention of the printing press was the first technology that spurred false news but the internet and social media have led to a huge increase in false news, seriously challenging and muddying "real" news. The lightning speed and global breadth of fake news today is simply mind boggling. Misinformation pieces generally are mistakes (e.g., errors the press prints and then tries its best to correct). Disinformation is purposeful falsehoods issued to sway folks, what authoritarians and kleptocrats typically engage in. Alternative facts, a phrase coined by Kellyanne Conway (2017), is a lie. Let me explain that I don't mean the discourses along the continuum as static points but as those that move and hover around the various relations to truth. In my class, I introduce these concepts and then the class explores, and writes on each of these rhetorics.

Pedagogical Moves

The assigned reading consists of three books and scholarly/newspaper/ magazine articles:

Daniel J. Levitin, *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (NewYork: Dutton, 2017). *Weaponized Lies* originally appeared a year earlier but with the election, it was renamed and reissued. It addresses strategies for reading and thinking about both numbers and verbal texts.

[2] For a thoughtful critique of Frankfurt's definition of bullshit and its role in academic writing, see Eubanks and Schaeffer (2008). It is a piece I assign to students in this course.

Bruce McComskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2017). *Post-Truth* covers a range of distorted discourses and calls for us to address these directly in rhetoric and composition courses.

Ryan Skinnell, ed., *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Donald J. Trump* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2018). *Faking the News* is an edited collection on Donald Trump's use of slippery language and symbols.

Students were responsible for four assignments as well as attendance/participation: a BS Inventory and Reflection; ten quizzes; an oral team presentation; and a final exam. I have space to discuss only two of these assignments. (For more details, see the syllabus in the Appendix.) Before I go into each assignment, I would like to include a brief word about the class atmosphere and activities: I put a great deal of weight on attendance and participation because the course is structured around discussions and in-class activities. This course is meant to develop a critical conscious so that students can become—as Quintilian taught in *circa* 95 AD—good people speaking well, and, in a word, critical democratic citizens. To develop these citizens, I followed John Pell and William Duffy's (2013) advice that I treat the classroom like an *agora*, a public open space for assemblies. In their words, "In order to be a place for civil discourse, . . . the public sphere also needs to be a place where differences are not only recognized but allowed to flourish. Disparity in attitude and belief, in other words, *is* the reason for discursive interaction" (p. 99). Indeed, as rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1969) argued, the reason we need discourse is precisely because we are divided; if we all thought exactly alike, there'd be little need for discourse. For this reason, we need and use rhetoric. Kenneth Burke (1969) defined rhetoric as the "use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (p. 41). In other words, rhetoric is meant to move people or encourage action to bring about change in situations and in people. This change can be evident through attitude, motives, or intentions but it can also be physical. Calling for aid is rhetorical, a means for calling for action. From the very small to the very large, rhetoric is social action that leads to social and political change.

To get students to understand Burke's rhetoric requires a pedagogy of civil discourse, one that looks to unity and identification rather than division and disjointed relations. In a pedagogy of civil discourse, "civility starts when students learn how to orient themselves toward one another *with* instead of *through* discourse itself" (Pell and Duffy, 2013, p. 96). Thus, students were encouraged to be aware and allow for difference to flourish by respecting all differences. Such pedagogical spaces don't prevent disagreements "but what we can do is allow students to *experience* the sociality of discourse by providing them the opportunity to act justly toward one another by recognizing that differences are not the evidence of lack, but of different material conditions" (Pell and Duffy, 2013, p. 104). This means being explicit in calling attention to differences inside and outside the class. It means teaching and heeding three of the habits of mind: Openness, Engagement, and Responsibility. As Pell and Duffy (2013) observe, "if we want an *agora* for actual civic space for deliberation and critical engagement with the ideas of others, we must invent it" (p. 102-03). In inventing it, we

need to foster respect for varying perspectives and engagement with the discursive materials, texts, visuals, and videos.

To help students get there, whole class discussions emerged out of small group discussions about the readings, during which students generated prompts and questions for the whole class that they placed on a white board. This move to write down questions made students responsible for considering how the talk might flow. Individuals from the small groups led the whole class discussions—most of which were lively, vibrant, and boisterous. In fact, I spent most of my time in class as an active rhetorical listener—adopting Krista Ratcliffe's (2006) approach to listening rhetorically and pedagogically—rather than as a speaker. The students engaged with each other in both small and large groups and grappled with differences with care and respect, an attitude I taught and insisted on. We held several discussions about how best to exhibit care and respect when we speak with each other. Students were instructed to listen carefully and fully to another student's point before entering their own. They were also taught to repeat what was being said to make sure they had understood and affirmed the discussion point before offering their response. Occasionally the discussions went off on tangents of personal experiences rather than issues raised by the readings, but these tangents sometimes were good teachable moments when the result veered toward disagreement. Overall the classroom discourse was cordial and respectful.

The assignments were equally successful, and, let me say, exhilarating, but I have space to write about just two: the BS Inventory and Reflection,[3] and the Oral Team Presentation. For the first, students were to conduct a "bullshit inventory" of all the BS they encountered and created in the course of one week. They were to conduct a critical rhetorical analysis of what they gathered. I introduced them to Raymie Mckerrow's (1989) explication of critical rhetorical analysis. As he points out, "In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change" (p. 91). In other words, the critique has as its end action, the hallmark of all good rhetorics. He goes on to write, "the telos that marks the project [of critical rhetoric] is one of never-ending skepticism" (p. 96); he goes further, "skepticism is a healthy response to a society which takes universalist dogma and the 'truths' it yields for granted" (p. 96). Students were open to being skeptical, something many said was how they approached digital rhetorics. Now they were asked to do the same with spoken rhetorics of BS. I explained that rhetoric (critical rhetoric and the rhetoric they were to analyze) deals with *doxa* (opinion). That is to say, rhetoric deals with ephemeral truths that need to be reargued again and again rather than certain knowledge (something rhetoricians find little faith in). In other words, rhetoric deals with the contingent. Yet while rhetoric is ephemeral its ends can be long lasting, so they were to consider that as they analyzed the BS they gathered.

[3] This assignment was adapted from one Carl T. Bergstrom and Jevin West (2018) created. The adaptation held onto the frame and purpose of the assignment along with the relevant wording. It changed to meet specifics of how to do the assignment. See http://callingbullshit.org/exercises_inventory.html.

Mckerrow turns to Wander's (1981) analysis of media as a praxis to use in critical rhetorical analysis. Wander points out:

> Most characters on prime time conform to conventional standards of beauty—they tend to be white or near white, fine-featured, young, well proportioned, and of average height. NEGATION: Few characters appear on prime time who are fat. Not many have scars, limps, or protruding lips. Few adult characters are under five feet or over six feet, four inches tall. Not many characters appear to be over 65. When physically 'deviant' characters do appear, they tend not to be cast as intelligent, strong, or virtuous. (p. 518-19)

Thus, I encouraged students to look for what was not there along with what was. And to consider what the absences taught them about the power and reach of the BS they gathered.

I encouraged them to be creative in how they displayed their data: using for instance, an interactive applet, data visualization software, PowerPoint, a stack of 3x5 cards, a song, a cartoon, a Venn diagram, text, or in any way that caught their fancy. And creative they were; students produced a chap book, a diary, a poem, cartoons, a game (with game board and pieces), a digital representation, to name a few. Each rendition was different from the next. They were also asked to critically reflect on the experience of collecting data, on the display type they chose, and what they learned through this assignment. We went over three timeframes for critical reflection: "reflection-on-action" (past experience), "reflection-in-action" (as the incident of BS happens), and "reflection-for-action" (actions one may want to take in the future when being confronted by BS). They were to work these into their own critical reflections.

In relation to the two frameworks I used (Top Ten Skills for Workplace Success [Curtin 2017], and the Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing [CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011]), this assignment ticked five workplace skills: critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, and cognitive flexibility, and six habits of mind boxes: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, and flexibility and with the reflection, metacognition. The overall quality of the work, with few exceptions, was outstanding. Students were passionate about their experiences with the frequency of BS, something they had not paid attention to in the past.

The second assignment was a team-developed oral class presentation on one or more practices covered in the class. This assignment gave students an opportunity to share what they had learned in the class and to work as a team member. I reminded them that teamwork is common in virtually all professional fields, whether a project is a collaborative research task, a co-authored work, or a single-researcher and/or author. That is, even if they were to undertake a project for which they are entirely responsible for the research and the writing, they would need to involve collaborators at points in the process (e.g., librarians or archivist to help with locating materials, responders to writing—peer readers, editor reader, reviewer reader of manuscript; copy editor, indexer, proof sheet editor, employers, customers, and so on). I stressed the point that when they do research, they never work in a vacuum or in an empty room in the attic; there are always people involved at certain points in scholarly and professional work.

Thus, teamwork was a critical component in the class. As Duffy and Pell (2013) theorize, "Critically pursued for its epistemological benefits, collaborative writing can result in texts greater than the sum of their individual parts. The reason for this is because the real value of collaborative writing is located in the reflexive work collaborators navigate when communicating with each other about not only what to write, but also how best to write it" (p. 248). Small daily group assignments meant students had practice in negotiating team participation. They also designed a contract concerning expectations for collaboration that members signed; it listed expectations and consequences if the expectations weren't met. I agree with Duffy and Pell's (2013) definition of "collaborative writing [as] an inventive process and reflexive relationship through which two or more writers synthesize their individual perspectives to create a new, shared voice through which to compose texts" (p. 251). The teams worked together on various in-class activities as well as outside of class to create their presentation. Each encounter was an inventive process that yielded impressive ends. Each encounter also helped team members develop relationships with each other.

For their presentation, they were told to show how they had achieved the 7 learning outcomes for the course:

Learning Outcomes

1. Gain knowledge about how counterfeit arguments and stories, as in BS, fake news, alternative facts, satire, and propaganda, are created and circulated.
2. Learn how to recognize counterfeit verbal and visual texts.
3. Strengthen interpretation and critical rhetorical analysis practices, considering how the rhetorical situation is key to these practices.
4. Reflect on diverse interpretations and perspectives that promote understanding of and respect for other perspectives
5. Strengthen research and collaboration skills through activities that require the synthesis of divergent ideas, information, and concepts.
6. Come to understand how changing media and technologies (re)shape information, education, society, and democracy.
7. Gain sensitivity to the ethical responsibilities of being an active citizen and a responsible communicator in the digital age.

They were given free rein on how to do the presentation. And free rein they took; one group constructed a fake news video, another filmed a fake-news event at our university (designed to see how susceptible students are to fake news; during that event, random students on campus were told that there was a petition to sign if they agreed with prop 202—a made-up prop that read "University of Arizona, our state rival, needs to return to Mexico"—some students took it seriously and signed the fake petition), still others used video clips from satires, another used visuals from current propaganda movements, and so on. This assignment ticked all the habits of mind boxes (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011) and nine of the workplace skills (Curtin, 2017): complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinatizing with

others, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, negotiation, and cognitive flexibility.

Survey and Interview Results

I wanted to find out whether students felt they had achieved the course goals and felt as positive about the class results as I did. Since the class was over, I contacted all the students via email to ask them to respond to a survey about the course. I promised them confidentiality in the letter of consent. Out of 38 survey requests, 14 responded. Although the response is limited (only 37% responded, but that is within typical response rates) and is colored by self-selection (respondents chose to answer), I was heartened by the number of students who did respond even though the semester had well passed.

The survey had ten Likert-scale questions that ranged from strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (DA), and strongly disagree (SD). The response rate was small and so should be taken cautiously. Nevertheless, I was encouraged by the responses as they upheld to a large degree my own assessment of the course.

Survey

Respond to the following statements in terms of agreement or disagreement: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (DA), strongly disagree (SD).

	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I learned strategies for detecting bias in a story.	85.7%	14.3%			
2. I learned how to recognize counterfeit verbal texts.	85.7%	7.1%	7.1%		
3. I learned strategies for analyzing visual material.	85.7%	14.3%			
4. I learned how media and technology shape messages.	92.8%		7.1%		
5. I learned how to write a fair and balanced argument.	78.5%	14.2%	7.1%		
6. I learned how to listen fairly to an argument in which I hold a differing point of view.	85.7%		14.3%		
7. I learned how to introduce differing points of view.	78.5%	7.1%	14.2%		
8. The materials and activities we engaged in were designed to achieve the course goals.	71.4%	12.5%	12.5%		
9. I learned the civic value of detecting fake news and BS.	85.7%		14.3%		
10. I would recommend this course to other students.	85.7%	7.1%	7.1%		

As the survey results show, the majority were highly positive in their responses but three questions (question 5, 7, and 8) yielded results worth pursuing as students seemed less prepared for writing fair and balanced views than they felt critically analyzing texts and were less enthusiastic with some of the in-class activities. These results flagged that I need to spend more time on teaching the writing of critical arguments to help students feel confident in generating such texts. I also need to take stock of the kinds of activities I introduce into the class and make clear when I assign them the relevancy of them. If students understand the purpose of an activity, they can see it as a positive experience.

Conclusion

As Swift 1971/(1710) taught us in the eighteenth century, "Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it" (p. 82). Today that lesson is especially poignant as we are confronted—even bombarded—daily with political falsehoods and powerful customized advertisements. We are in a discursive war where we need to create armor around ourselves as we seek out the truth of events and talk. The theoretical frameworks I draw on offer ways of devising that armor that free critical democratic citizens need. In this way, we can detect, deflect, and challenge falsehoods that are swung at us online and in person.

Let me end with a call that one of my students issued in the evaluation of the course:

> I know this course was probably a temporary thing, but it needs to be available for at least two or preferably more semesters. I learned how to engage with news better than I ever have before and have respectful conversations about it without getting angry and rude. There's a lot of students who NEED this course to make them into better academics and better people in general, because above all, this course was an exercise in critical thinking and that's valuable beyond words.

This passionate attitude was shared by others. Some students told me it was the most engaging class they had ever had while at college. I'd like to take full credit, but the class was successful largely because of the frameworks in which I situated it: The Top Ten Workplace Skills, the WPA framework for Success, critical reflection, and critical rhetoric, along with my efforts to create an environment of acceptance, trust, and engagement. It was also successful because of the hard work of the students. That hard work has generated material I can use in future classes (e.g., sample BS Inventories and Reflections, and sample oral presentations). I am looking forward to teaching it again. And I urge all of you to make space in your classes for work on post-truth discourse.

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Appendix
Syllabus

Analyzing BS, Fake News, And Alternative Facts

Truth matters. A post-truth era is an era of willful irrationality, reversing all the great advances humankind has made.

--Daniel J. Levitin

Whatever its other cultural and social merits, our digital ecosystem seems to have evolved into a near-perfect environment for fake news to thrive.

--Mark Thompson

We are living in an era where reality, truth, and facts are being turned upside down and inside out. One of the signs of this dizzying state is the creation of two neologisms (new terms): *fake news* and *alternative facts*. They join with an early 20th century term, *bullshit*. This semester we will analyze the use, meaning, and etymology of these three terms and others. We can think of them along a continuum moving from truth to an ambivalence to truth to mainly falsehoods to outright lies. Along this continuum, we find everything from satires to hoaxes to misinformation to counterfeit news stories to propaganda to alternative facts. Satires, which range from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" to *Onion* stories like "NFL to Curb Excessive Celebrations by Removing Areas of Players' Brains Responsible for Emotions" to episodes of *The Daily Show*, offer humorous exaggerations to expose and criticize people and governments. Counterfeit news stories, though, are malicious fabrications created usually for political ends. Nazi propaganda of WWII and recent fraudulent stories such as "Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump," a story that went viral on Facebook, are intended to mislead readers. Although counterfeit news has been around since ancient times (Octavia used disinformation to win over Marc Anthony in the last war of the Roman Republic), the internet and social media have led to a huge increase in false news, especially during the 2016 presidential election, seriously challenging and muddying "real" news. Each fake story can rapidly multiply over sites such as Facebook and Twitter and through email, sometimes with devastating effects. As a reader, you need to be able to see whether or not a story or an argument is fake. As a writer, you risk harming your credibility if you cite a counterfeit story as evidence. Thus, we will study how to detect bullshit, fake news, and alternative facts in this course.

Learning Outcomes

1. Gain knowledge about how counterfeit arguments and stories as in BS, fake news, alternative facts, satire, and propaganda are created and circulated.
2. Learn how to recognize counterfeit verbal and visual texts.
3. Strengthen interpretation and critical analysis practices, considering how the rhetorical situation is key to these practices.

4. Reflect on diverse interpretations and perspectives that promote understanding of and respect for other perspectives
5. Strengthen research and collaboration skills through activities that require the synthesis of divergent ideas, information, and concepts.
6. Come to understand how changing media and technologies (re)shape information, education, society, and democracy.
7. Gain sensitivity to the ethical responsibilities of being an active citizen and a responsible communicator in the digital age.

Required Texts:

Daniel J. Levitin, *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (NewYork: Dutton, 2017).

Bruce McComskey *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2017).

Ryan Skinnell, ed., *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Donald J. Trump* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2018).

Other Readings on Blackboard (BB) or Online with URL provided in syllabus.

Recommended Readings: *The Debunking Handbook* and *The Alt-Right on Campus* on BB

Assignments [Detailed instructions will be handed out]:

- BS Reflection 20%
- Quizzes 20%
- Presentation 20%
- Final exam 25%
- Attendance and participation 15%

Syllabus

ENG 494 **Note:** Assignments due on date listed.

Week 1 **Introduction**

Class 1: Introduction to course

Class 2: Read "The Long and Brutal History of Fake News" and "Post-Truth Named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries" on BB. "Post-Truth" and "Bullshit" in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* pp. 3-13

Week 2 **BS**

Class 1: Read "On Bullshit" on BB "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing" on BB

Class 2: Read "Donald Trump is BS" and "Bullshit is a Greater Enemy than Lies" and "The Bullshitter-in-Chief" on BB

Week 3 **Keepin' it Real: spotting BS**

Class 1: Martin Luther King Holiday--No Class

Class 2: Read "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection" and "How to Detect Bullshit" on BB

Week 4 **Misinformation: Zooming in on Words**

Class 1: Read "Thinking Critically" (pp. xiii-xxii), "How Do We know?" (pp. 123-128) in *Weaponized Lies*

Due: BS Reflection and data inventory

Class 2: Read Identifying Experience" (129-151), "Overlooked, Undervalued, Alternative Explanations" (152-167), and "Counter Knowledge" (168-177) in *Weaponized Lies*

Week 5 **Misinformation: Zooming in on Numbers**

Class 1: Read "Plausibility" (3-10), "Fun with Averages" (11-25), and "Axis Shenanigans" (26-42) in *Weaponized Lies*

Class 2: Read "Hijinks with How Numbers are Reported" (43-74) in *Weaponized Lies* and "Storks Deliver Babies ($p = 0.008$)" in BB

Week 6 **More Numbers and Science**

Class 1: "How Numbers are Collected" (75-96) and "Probabilities" (97-120) in *Weaponized Lies*

Class 2: Read "How Science Works" (181-197), and "Logical Fallacies" (198-210) in *Weaponized Lies*

Week 7 **Thinking Through Information**

Class 1: Read "What You Don't Know" (211-215), and "Thinking in Science and in Court" (216-221) in *Weaponized Lies*

Class 2: "Four Case Studies" (222-250), and Conclusion (251-254) in *Weaponized Lies*

Week 8 **Satire: Trouble when Jokes Taken at Face Value**

Class 1: Read "On Satire" and "On Satire in the Arts" on BB

Class 2: Read "The Limits of Satire" and "The Abuse of Satire" on BB

Week 9 **SPRING BREAK—NO CLASSES**

Week 10 **Propaganda**

Class 1: Read: "Teaching about Propaganda" on BB

Class 2: Read "The Power of Visual Material" on BB

Week 11 **Fake News**

Class 1: Read "A Peek Inside the Strange World of Fake Academia" on BB and "Fake News" pp. 13-20 in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*

Class 2: Read "Ethos" and "Pathos" pp. 20-33 and "The Trump Effect" pp. 33-37 in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, and "Introduction to *Faking the News*" pp. 1-6 in *Faking the News*

Week 12 **Fake News**

Class 1: Read "What Passes for Truth in the Trump Era" pp. 76-94, "Donald Trump's Perverse Political Rhetoric" pp. 160-73 and "Demagoguery and the Duplicitous Victimhood" pp. 7-20 in *Faking the News*

Class 2: Read "Charisma Isn't Leadership" pp.95-107, "Great Television" pp. 108-22, and How #Trump Broke/Red the Internet" pp. 123-41 in *Faking the News*

Week 13 **Fake News**

Class 1: Read "Trump's *Not* Just One Bad Apple" pp. 39-52, "Who Owns Donald Trump's Antisemitism?" pp. 53-75, and "Rhetorics of Fear and Loathing" pp. 21-38 in *Faking the News*

Class 2: Read "Putting His Ass in Aspirational" 142-59 and "Afterword" 174-79 in *Faking the News*

Week 14 **Fake News**

Class 1: Read "The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News" and "How to Spot Fake News" on BB

Class 2: Read: "Can AI Win the War Against Fake News?" on BB and "The Trump Effect" in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* pp. 33-37

Week 15 **Alternative Facts and Debunking Myths**

Class 1: Read "'Alternative Facts': The Needless Lies of the Trump Administration" and "With 'Fake News,' Trump Moves from Alternative Facts to Alternative Language" on BB

Class 2: Read "Post-Truth Composition" and "Consequences of Neglecting to Act" in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* pp. 37-45

Week 16 **Sharing our Work**

Class 1: Presentations

Class 2: Presentations

FINAL EXAM DUE

Maureen Daly Goggin is Professor of Rhetoric at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona. She is the author and editor of eleven scholarly books and several editions of a Norton textbook as well as a pedagogical book. She is co-editor with Beth Tobin for a series of five books on women and material culture through Ashgate publishers. Her latest work is Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research *(University of Colorado Press, 2018) co-edited with Peter N. Goggin. She has written widely about women and material culture, the history of rhetoric, writing pedagogy, and research methodology in both journals and edited collections.*