Seeking Truth in an Age of Misinformation, Cynicism, and Political Polarization

Political Science 380
Professor Mark Alan Smith
Assistance for my former student

My background
email: masmith@uw.edu
office hours: Tuesdays 2:00-3:00 in Gowen 29
Wed 4:00-5:00 by Zoom (see Canvas for link)

TA: Anna Nguyen, sections AA (10:30) and AB (11:30)
email: nguyenad@uw.edu
office hours: Thursdays 1:00-3:00 in Smith 24

TA: Christianna Parr, sections AC (12:30) and AD (1:30)
email: parr182@uw.edu
office hours: Tuesdays 1:30-3:30 in Smith 24
What this class is about: your expectations at the outset?
Explaining the title of the course

truth (Oxford English Dictionary): “something that conforms with fact or reality”

the truth: “The fact or facts; the actual state of the case; the matter, situation, or circumstance as it really is”

We’ll be considering many kinds of truth (scientific, historical, political, religious, moral, etc.).

“Seeking truth” implies that the quest is difficult. If it was easy, we wouldn’t need this class.
Some questions about what you think is true

An implication: some of your beliefs (and mine) are wrong.

Misinformation: false information, generally offered without the intent to mislead

Many people assume that it’s only others who spread misinformation, which would be easy to purge from the Internet and social media. To address misinformation, however, we first need a reliable method of identifying what is and isn’t true.
“Dihydrogen monoxide is a colorless and odorless chemical compound that contributes to thousands of deaths every year. Inhaling it, even in small quantities, can be life-threatening. Dihydrogen monoxide is a major component of acid rain, and it leads to the corrosion and oxidation of many metals.

A proposed voter initiative would require counties in Washington to measure and report the levels of dihydrogen monoxide flowing through the pipes of every home. The initiative would empower the Washington State Department of Ecology to issue regulations to protect people from the dangers of dihydrogen monoxide.”
Elaborating further on the title of the course:

- cynicism
“Now I’m going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?” (Gallup, July 2022)

The next slide combines those saying “a great deal” and “quite a lot”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>small business</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the military</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the police</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the medical system</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the church or organized religion</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the public schools</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organized labor</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banks</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large technology companies</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Supreme Court</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Presidency</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspapers</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the criminal justice system</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big business</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television news</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How can someone figure out what’s true if they don’t trust political institutions, the medical system, technology companies, the criminal justice system, the media, and other institutions?

Many people rely on their social and political groups—which brings us to the subject of political polarization.
political polarization: “the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats” (Pew Research Center)

This gap includes positions on policy questions but goes beyond them to include values, matters of fact (empirical truths), and feelings toward the “other side.”
Multi-disciplinary orientation of the course and the readings

The course upholds the value of viewpoint diversity in the search for truth

Heterodox Academy:
https://heterodoxacademy.org/
Class policies:

- no recordings; lecture slides/notes available on Canvas shortly after each class session
- coming late, leaving early
- laptop use
- norms around respect, dignity, discussion, engagement, diversity, open-mindedness
Other class policies:

- Requests for extensions will not be considered after a deadline has passed
- Requests for extensions within four hours of a deadline: submit work completed so far
- Cheating and plagiarism
- No leaving the room during in-person exams
- Incompletes
- Recordings prohibited in lectures and sections, unless authorized through Disability Resources for Students

Acknowledgment of class policies: due Wed., Oct. 5
The flow of the quarter: three parts. Canvas page for links to readings/videos/podcasts.

Grading:
Acknowledgment of course policies: 1%
Weekly response memos: 14%
Midterm exam: 25%
Paper: 30%
Final exam: 30%
Course strategy for readings/videos/podcasts:

- Workload: about two hours per lecture session
- Maximize what can be learned in the available hours
- Some readings/videos/podcasts will be the big ideas, presented in an accessible way, from a scholar or writer’s larger body of work
- Ideally, these are works you would want to engage even if you were not taking this class
- Weekly response memos: a check-in to see that you’re keeping up with the readings. Will be graded generously.
What do you need to know from the readings/videos/podcasts?

- General points that relate to the course (the search for truth)

- You’ll get advance warning to focus on particular readings/videos/podcasts for the exams

- You’ll be asked to engage with the readings/videos/podcasts (you’ll choose which ones) in the paper due near the end of the quarter
Most of the time, I will bring you other people’s ideas, concepts, and research findings. Anything original or distinctive to me will be labeled as such.

Readings for next class