

# TRUTH DECAY

Friday 10:30-Noon

Christ Presbyterian Church

Jack Mitchell (*jwmitch1@wisc.edu*)

*The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists. (Hannah Arendt)*

## Course Description

Former President Trump and many of his supporters deny the fact that he lost the 2020 election. Millions reject the facts of climate change. Progressives and libertarians who agree on nothing else staunchly refuse vaccinations for their children despite medical consensus on their importance.

Traditional news media are falsely accused of reporting fake news, while upstart media make no pretense of sticking to facts and striving for truth.

This course will look at current issues and examples in the context of evolving attitudes toward human rationality. We will discuss, too, media technology from the printing press to the Internet and their implications for journalism that pursues truth and propaganda that seeks to persuade.

### Week One (September 24)

The Enlightenment path to truth. Our country was born during a unique moment in human history called The Enlightenment, when philosophers believed men – and possibly women – were essentially rational and capable of finding a semblance of truth through free discussion, the sifting and winnowing the University of Wisconsin proclaims as its mission.

### Week Two (October 1)

Anti-intellectualism in American Life. The classic study by Richard Hofstadter shows what happened when Enlightenment concepts were extended from the better educated elite to mass democracy.

Week Three (October 8)

The professional path to truth. In the 1920s, philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann rejected most Enlightenment assumptions, proclaiming prejudice more powerful than reason, and proposing science based objectivity as the goal of journalism and public life.

Week Four (October 15)

Propaganda. Sharing Lippmann's critique of human rationality and the insights of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays, the "father of public relations," gave us propaganda as an alternative to Enlightenment concepts and to objectivity.

Week Five (October 22)

Technology. The printing press made possible the Enlightenment. Adding power to those presses created mass media and fostered gatekeeping. Broadcasting reinforced media as a mass enterprise and empowered them as gatekeepers and agenda setters. The Internet and social media changed all that.

Week Six (October 29)

Academic liberals question objectivity. First in literature and then elsewhere in academia, post-modernism called into question the value – or even the possibility – of objective inquiry. Different groups may see different truths.

Week Seven (Nov 5)

Contemporary populists question truth. While probably unaware of the attacks on objectivity within academia, Donald Trump and his followers adopted similar attitudes toward science and objective inquiry.

Week Eight (Nov 12)

What Next?