

**SUMMER
2024
WEEKS 4-6**



Critical Thinking in an Age of Fake News and False Information

IEEL002

Credit Value	Delivery	Contact Hours Per module	Self-Directed Hours Per module	Total Hours Per module
5 UoL credit, 2.5 ECTS	On-campus	12-16	34-38	50

Module Leader: Dr. Phil Leeke

Phil has worked all over the world as a lecturer/Instructor. In the Middle East he worked at Zayed University Abu Dhabi/Dubai where he helped to establish many of the early programmes in English language when it was a start-up institution. He has also worked at the universities of Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham and Stirling. At Stirling he was the Director of Language programmes. His main interests include narratology, critical thinking, EAP, and the American writer Philip Roth.

Module Description

Critical thinking is vital in age of bad science, counter knowledge and the spread of fake news. It is also a much valued skill for future employment. This module is students who would like to learn more about the process of thinking and how we can distinguish the plausible (could be true) from the implausible (probably not true) and the ridiculous. How and why does fake news spread? What is counter knowledge? How can we tell a good theory from a bad? Why are conspiracy theories so attractive? What is "bullshit"? Why is there so much of it? The knowledge and skills developed through this module will be valued around the globe, and are also transferrable to many disciplines.

Module Aims:

To build students' confidence in understanding, discussing and communicating complex ideas, both in written and spoken language.

To develop skills in research, collaborative learning and in preparing and delivering a group presentation

To introduce students to the concept of critical thinking and some of the main reasons why we are so poor at thinking and often make poor decisions. Students will be reflect on the process of thinking as well as think about some of the most important issues facing the world today.

Content

The following topics will be considered on the module:

Fake news

Frankfurt's concept of bullshit.

Counter knowledge and Conspiracy theory

Political discourse analysis

The Pinker Gray debate

Ethos pathos logos

Narrative and argument.

Module Structure

The module will be delivered over a three-week period in six two-hour sessions (four hours per week, total 12 hours contact time). The final block will be an assessment session.

Each session will take the form of an interactive seminar, mini lecture or workshop. The students will demonstrate a knowledge of the complexity involved in thinking critically and an awareness of the increasingly difficulty in finding reliable sources of information in an *Information Obese environment*. Students will have ample opportunities to demonstrate an increased mastery of critical thinking skills through the many tasks completed throughout the course

In addition, it is expected that students will spend 38 study hours outside of the classroom contact hours on activities including assigned reading, optional reading of areas of personal interest, homework tasks, web research and preparation for assessment. The 'flipped classroom' approach will be used, requiring students to prepare in advance for the sessions, and so students should be aware that in order to fully benefit from the face-to-face classroom sessions, they will need to have done the preparation work assigned beforehand.

Teaching Methods

The teaching approach will include the following:

Taught sessions

Flipped classroom – preparation work

Small group working
Group discussions
Presentations
Online learning
Workshops

Assessment:

Assessment will be by:

Written essay/reflection of 1000–1200 words (worth 100% of the overall mark)

Standard University policies apply with regard to late submission of assessments

Course Structure:

The course will be both theoretical and practical in nature, with the sessions focused on giving the students as much hands on experience as possible, and encouraging them to apply their ideas throughout

The indicative schedule is as follows:

Session One:

Introduction to the Module and Introduction to Critical Thinking

The course will begin with some general information about the module, including the aims and assessment. Then it moves on to consider the importance of critical thinking historically.

Socrates famously said 'the unexamined life is not worth living' – but was he right? What might happen if we don't think?

Session Two:

Bias and representation: why we are not Bayesian updaters.

This session asks why thinking is difficult and looks at the many factors that stop us from thinking effectively. Students will be introduced to the language of critical thinking including confirmation bias, false equivalence, fallacious comparison, non sequitur and claim and counterclaim. We will also look at Aristotle's Ethos, Pathos, Logos and how it can be used in persuasive and sometimes manipulative communication. Students will have the opportunity to practise analysing claims and counterclaims and saying why they find them plausible or not.

Session Three:

Fake news, conspiracy theory, counter knowledge and bullshit.

Some people think that 'Everything is connected' but is it? This session examines the growth of such concepts and how we can guard against them. Why is it important to be able to falsify a theory in the sense demanded by Karl Popper?

Students will critically examine different websites and think about how they can be evaluated.

Session Four:

Political discourse and its discontents: the abuse of rhetoric.

Many politicians use phrases like 'It's a fact that...' However, are they always truthful? How do people use rhetoric to persuade people? In this session students will examine a politician's speech and the techniques it uses to persuade people of its validity. Insights and concepts from critical discourse analysis will be examined

Session Five:

It's going to get worse. Isn't it?

In critical thinking arguments are important, but they are usually part of larger narratives. One such narrative is the idea of progress. The philosopher John Grey does not believe that humanity has made significant ethical progress. The psychologist Steven Pinker believes that we have. Pinker thinks we are becoming less violent. This is important for conflict management past and present. Where do students stand on this vital issue? In this session students will practise analysing two radically incommensurable points of view. Can there ever be a middle ground?

Session Six:

In this final session, the students will talk about what they have learnt in the previous sessions and discuss their ideas and thoughts on the subject. Students' questions that need to be clarified will be answered in this reflection session.

Learning Outcomes:

On completion of this module, students will be able to:

Learning outcome	Assessment component which assesses this learning outcome
Better understand and communicate complex ideas in written language	Written essay/reflection
Research a topic and work collaboratively in this research to produce a written essay/reflection	Written essay/reflection
Demonstrate a much greater awareness of the importance of critical thinking and the difficulty of finding reliable sources of information.	Written essay/reflection

Skills:

Key skills that will be developed:

Skill	How this skill is developed	Mode of assessment
Collaboration and Teamwork	Group discussions, activities and tasks in class & collaborative research	Written essay/reflection

Communication	Orally in group discussions, activities and tasks in class, in writing by production of assessed assignment	Written essay/reflection
Critical Thinking	Thinking tasks in class	Written essay/reflection

Books, ebooks and websites:

The University Website at www.liv.ac.uk/library provides access to many relevant books and electronic books, as well as academic journals and databases.

Recommended Pre-Course Reading

These texts come from the academic policy blog The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/us> and from The Post truth Initiative <https://posttruthinitiative.org/> at the University of Sydney.

The Conversation

India has been a post-truth society for years (and maybe the West has too). *Ranjit Gosswami.*

Post-Truth politics and the US election: why the narrative trumps the facts. *Peter Ellerton*

How conspiracy theories feed political fragmentation. *Turkay Nefes*

Fake news: if you care about being lied to you'll be more careful about the way you use social media. *Paul Bernal*

It was Big Tobacco, not Trump, that wrote the post-truth rule book. *Andrew Rowell and Karen Evans Reeves*

Navigating the post-truth debate: some key co-ordinates. *Nick Enfield*

The ironclad logic of conspiracy theories and how to break it. *Peter Ellerton.*

The world has never been as safe and peaceful as it is now. John Armstrong. (This is a review of the Steven Pinker assertion that we are becoming less violent) A rebuttal to this can be found at the Guardian website entitled: Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and War <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining/>

The following texts come from some recent posts at the Post Truth Initiative. They are indicative of what you might like to read. However, please feel free to explore.

October 19 | 18 pessimistic opinions on the next 10 years of fake news (and 5 optimistic ones)

October 16 | Want to be a better online sleuth? Learn to read webpages like a fact-checker

October 12 | Trump's War on Knowledge October 06 | The scientist who spots fake videos

October 04 | Stop Expecting Facebook and Google to Curb Misinformation — It's Great for Business

October 02 | Notes on a new beginning by Mark Little and Áine Kerr

September 26 | Eleanor Mills: Women are still portrayed through the lens of an old, male, pale, stale establishment

September 26 | Demons and aliens, one-third of Australians expect a visit September 18 | Reliance on 'gut feelings' linked to belief in fake news

September 15 | Project to "fact check" genetic studies leads to three more retractions. And it's just getting started

September 14 | Post-truth Politics, Bullshit and Bad Ideas: 'Deficit Fetishism' in the UK

September 07 | Don't give up on the fact-resistant: Tips to break the grip of misinformation

September 04 | 'Tawdry' politicians want to damage universities, says Oxford v-c September 01 | How I came to know that I am a closet climate denier

September 01 | A pre-history of post-truth, East and West

August 30 | Why We Need the Liberal Arts Now More Than Ever

August 29 | Researchers taught AI to write totally believable fake reviews, and the implications are terrifying

Core Texts

Ball, James. (2017). Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World.

All of this is relevant but students may dip in as they please. Frankfurt, H.G., (2009). On bullshit. Princeton University Press. The classic statement.

Hofstadter, R., (2012). The paranoid style in American politics. Vintage.

Hofstadter's seminal essay is online.

Sagan, C. (1997). The demon-haunted world: Science as a candle in the dark. Random House.

Chapter Twelve is the one to read: The Fine Art of Baloney Detection.

Silverman, Craig (2012) Verification Handbook: an ultimate guideline on digital age sourcing For emergency coverage. The Poynter Institute.

This is available online. Chapter ten provides a useful list of verification tools that can be printed out.

Useful Websites

<http://callingbullshit.org/>

<https://posttruthinitiative.org/>

<https://theconversation.com/uk>

<https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/> (This is a particularly good piece on different types of fake news and how they can be characterised.)