The late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan gets credit for one of the best comeback lines in politics when he told an opponent: “You are entitled to your own opinion. You are not entitled to your own facts.”

In other words, there are no such things as “alternative facts” despite what you might hear coming from politicians and others who seek to not just bend the truth for their own purposes but to recreate a false version of it.

“A lie told often enough becomes the truth.” -- Vladimir Lenin

This new course is timely and especially relevant as we face an increasingly bizarre and conflicting array of sources of information, falsehoods and factoids, coupled with an unprecedented assault on journalists and journalism. Relentless and unfounded attacks on journalists – branding all but favored semi-state-run media as “fake news” – is an attack on the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the right of people to obtain the information they need to remain self-governing.

“What is truth?” -- Pontius Pilate

We will begin this seminar with by studying the essentials of journalism, focusing on its vital role in democracy. Next, we will look at the process and procedures to discern what is often called verifiable truth and how forces that try to undermine journalism ultimately are undermining the democratic ideals that are part of the foundation of the United States. Moving on, we will examine in detail the scope of deception practiced by politicians and others, near and far, old and new. Finally, we will look into careful reading and viewing of daily news and constant fact checking as we discern one of journalism’s gold standards – the best obtainable version of the truth.

“Anyone who doesn't take truth seriously in small matters cannot be trusted in large ones either.” -- Albert Einstein

How do we know what’s true? How can we find out? What guides our search? And by the way, who determines what is true? We will find the answers to these questions together over the weeks of this semester.
BOOKS AND MEDIA

"Unspun," Jackson and Jamieson (paper or electronic for all books is fine)  
“Weaponized Lies,” Levitan  
“The Soul of the First Amendment,” Abrams  
The New York Times, daily online edition (get the student discount)  
The Washington Post, daily online edition (free with .edu email address)  
On the Washington Post site: the interactive daily fact checker  
All the major networks, all the cable shows (as news dictates)  
factcheck.org  
politifact.com  
Select Twitter accounts  
Other magazines and news sites as news dictates

ATTENDANCE

This is a discussion-based seminar, which means that it is especially important that you come to class to contribute as part of our learning community. You have to come to class. Period. If you miss, we will miss you…and you will fall behind. This means you must also be on time for class, as a courtesy to everyone else. **If you have five unexcused absences, you will fail the course.**

Let me know in advance if you have to miss a class. You are responsible for finding out whatever assignments or materials were covered in class. I am reasonable about working with extenuating circumstances, if you communicate well. Missing class does not mean you can miss a deadline, unless you are dealing with an emergency such as a serious illness or family crisis. Please keep me informed of such events as best as you can.

“Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.” -- Buddha

READING

It should go without saying that you must be immersed in the news but since that process could be overwhelming, we will focus on the major stories and broadcasts that are driving the day. You need to read the Times and the Post daily – yes, even weekends. Both papers have email headline news services, so I would suggest subscribing to those to curate your content and reduce your burden. You need to also watch the major news networks and we will also watch partisan networks to explore the differences between objective journalism, however imperfect, and biased reporting. And given President Trump’s penchant for Tweeting, you need to have a Twitter account.
ASSIGNMENTS

We have three short writing assignments for this class, weekly news quizzes (true or false will be a blast) and one final paper.

For the writing assignments, three-page max on each of these:
1) find a lie that a public official tries to pass off as real news and show how/why it is false; due in mid-September
2) find a threat to U.S. press freedom instigated by a public official or public figure; due in late October
3) find a source of “fake news,” tell how it entered the media landscape and discuss consequences; (due before Thanksgiving break)

The final paper is a deep-dive of your choice into any of three options above. This paper of no more than 10 pages should include material from our texts, class discussion and any other sources that you believe are relevant.

Making the grade:
50 percent: Writing assignments
20 percent: progress and participation
15 percent: final paper
15 percent: quizzes

TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE

We will start by reading “UnSpun” and getting up to speed with the news. After that, given the nature of the news cycle, we will plan day by day. I will tell you in advance about reading or viewing assignments. You are encouraged to suggest stories, broadcasts, etc., that you think would benefit our group.

OFFICE HOURS, ETC.

I am on campus every day during the week, but it is best to send an email a day ahead of time to set up a meeting. I am available by email, phone and in person during most reasonable hours and at some unreasonable times.

“Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it ain't goin' away.”
-- Elvis Presley