

PROPAGANDA



Expos 20: Propaganda

Memorial Hall 303

Section 221: T-Th 10:30AM

Section 222: T-Th 1:30PM

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Office Hours:
T/Th 3-4PM (or by appt.)

Course Website:

canvas.harvard.edu/courses/52159

I. Course Overview

During the Second World War, Nazi SS officers executed some twenty thousand Polish prisoners of war, burying their bodies in hastily-dug mass graves in a pine forest near Russia's western edge. In April 1943, news of the atrocity was broadcast over US-government funded radio stations, adding to the long litany of Nazi crimes against humanity. The only problem? The story wasn't true. The mass graves were real, but the Polish prisoners had in fact been killed several years earlier by Soviet officers on orders from Josef Stalin—or "Uncle Joe," as he was known affectionately in the US. In today's parlance, the broadcast was "fake news." Truth, as the saying goes, is war's first victim, and the conflicts of the twentieth century saw the widespread use of propaganda on all sides. But what explains the wide reach of deception and influence campaigns today? How has social media galvanized new tools of mass influence, and how has a fragmented and polarized media landscape enabled their spread? In this course, we'll look at the history and current state of propaganda, disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories over our three course units, which are structured respectively around images, films and narratives:

Unit One

The Image as Propaganda

Our first unit will begin with a brief history of the modern use of images as a tool of mass persuasion, starting with posters made in the US and Europe between the world wars. Using these posters and images, we'll grapple with various definitions of propaganda (a word that has often been used to disparage any discourse that the speaker disagrees with) and attempt to arrive at a working understanding of the term.

After this historical background, we'll move from posters to posts—in this case, social-media posts designed to sway voters in the 2016 elections—as we progress toward our first paper. For this analysis, we'll draw on a collection of online ads promoted by the Internet Research Agency (the so-called “Russian troll factory”) to see how tools of mass influence are being adapted to our age of social media. We'll work on **close-reading skills** in our analyses of these ads, moving from drafting initial response paper to generating an analytical question and thesis and culminating in a focused rhetorical analysis on a feature or strategy of this campaign.

Unit Two

Film as Propaganda

In our second unit, we'll shift from the image to film, a medium that offers unparalleled abilities to sway its audience. As before, we'll begin with a historical overview of the development of film as propaganda, beginning with Soviet agitprop directors like Sergei Eisenstein, who developed techniques of viewer manipulation through montage and a filmmaking style that reached its technical apogee (and moral nadir) in the works of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. But our main focus, as in the first unit, will be on exploring how propaganda techniques have been adapted to fit our contemporary media landscape.

To address this question, we'll watch the documentary *Kony 2012*, a film that quickly became the most-watched video (with currently over a hundred million views) on YouTube when it was released in 2012. Produced by the nonprofit organization Invisible Children, *Kony 2012* raised money for and awareness around the plight of the victims of rebel leader Joseph Kony in central Africa. Following its release, the documentary faced a barrage of criticism around claims of emotional manipulation, oversimplifications and its questionable politics of representation—all hallmarks of film propaganda. For our responses and our unit paper, we'll wade into the controversy, learning how to **intervene in a critical debate**: summarizing and responding to secondary sources and positioning our own conclusions within a larger scholarly conversation.

Unit Three

Disinformation, Fake News, and Conspiracy Theories

Our final unit will take a broader look at how narratives, especially false narratives, can be used to shape attitudes. We'll start with a look at Soviet propaganda techniques of disinformation—for instance, planting fake news stories in friendly media sources around the globe—and trace this phenomenon to the present with the proliferation of dubious narratives on both sides of the political divide in the US. This unit allows you much more freedom in selecting a topic for your final paper, which will analyze a conspiracy theory or propaganda campaign of your choice. In this unit, we'll focus on skills for writing the college **research paper**, from initial gathering and evaluation of sources through the entirety of the drafting and revision process.

II. The Writing Sequence

During each of the above units, we'll progress through the same steps in our writing process:

- **Response Papers:** As a way to begin generating ideas and building for your unit paper, we'll write response papers near the start of each unit, typically about **a page or two** in length.
 - **Drafts:** For each of our three units, you will submit a completed paper—**not a rough draft**, but rather what you might turn in as a final draft in another class—which you will later revise based on my written comments (and possibly feedback from a class workshop) along with our conference discussion.
 - **Cover Letters:** Each paper submission, whether draft or revision, **should be accompanied by a cover letter**. This cover letter is a chance for you to reflect on any difficulties or questions that arose while writing, and to consider how you might make the work stronger. More guidance on cover letters will be provided before your first draft paper submission.
- **Draft Workshops:** For each unit, I will select two student draft papers for an in-class workshop. This is an opportunity not only for the authors of these papers to receive suggestions on revision, but a chance for readers to hone their editing and critical reading skills. Selected papers will be emailed to the class about twenty-four hours before the workshop. For each of these student papers, you will provide **written feedback to the student authors** (with a copy of your feedback to me for class participation credit). Detailed workshop guidelines will be issued in advance of our first paper draft.
- **Conferences:** When you submit your draft paper for each unit, you will sign up on Canvas for an **individual twenty-minute conference** with me on revisions. I'll try to get you my detailed comments on your paper no later than the evening before our conference, so you'll have some time to read and reflect on them. Bring this printed paper with you to the conference with your thoughts on revisions.
- Please note:** With thirty individual conferences for each unit of our course, my schedule around paper-submission time is very tight, and I will not be available for my regular office hours during conference week. If you miss your conference or arrive late, this time cannot be made up, unfortunately. Similarly, I am unable to give personal feedback on further drafts after our conference, though you may always schedule an appointment at the writing center if you need additional help.
- **Revised papers:** After you have received feedback on your draft during conference, you will have one week to revise your paper and submit it to me for a grade. This week is enough time for you to undertake **substantial revisions**. Standards for these revisions are quite high: You will almost certainly be expected to do much more than edit or proofread your paper, but may instead end up reworking your argument and/or incorporating new evidence or analysis. These revisions will be submitted via Canvas and are final, at least for the purposes of grading. I will provide written feedback along with your grade, though it will be less detailed than during the draft phase.



III. Course Policies

Class Participation

This is a process-oriented course, so taking active part in the daily activities of the class—discussion of the readings, peer review workshops, writing exercises, etc.—is an essential part of our learning. Participation means not just reading the assigned material, but marking it up with a pen and being ready to share thoughts on it with the rest of the class.

Participation also means fostering a **caring and supportive classroom community**, one in which we may all learn from each other as we continue to develop as writers.

Expos Notebook

Each student must **purchase a single-subject notebook** for this class, and use it throughout the semester to take notes, sketch out ideas, or draft responses to readings, etc. Near the end of the course, I may ask you to show me that you have been writing in this notebook when I've instructed, and this may be factored into your participation grade for the course.

Laptop Policy

As a screen addict myself, I understand the temptations of being constantly plugged in to the world outside the classroom. I also understand how disruptive our electronic devices can be to the sustained concentration needed for quality writing and thinking. For this reason, **I do not generally allow laptops/iPads**, even for notetaking, in the classroom, unless I have expressly asked you in advance to bring them to class. This means that all our electronic course reading must be printed out and brought to class, since you will not be able to consult them on a screen during our discussions.

Communication

To avoid using class time on logistical announcements, I will be communicating with you via email and Canvas announcements when needed. You should be checking your Harvard email at least once daily. I will do the same on every weekday, and can generally answer most questions from you within twenty-four hours, except over the weekend.

In addition to electronic communication, we will be meeting in person throughout the semester. When we have a draft conference scheduled, I ask that you come with your **printed draft of your paper** with my comments, a pen and notebook, and some preliminary ideas about how you plan to proceed with revisions.

Grading

Your final course grade is the weighted average of the following: Participation (including exercises, response papers, and commenting on other students' work as well as in-class participation): 10%; Unit 1 Revision: 20%; Unit 2 Revision: 30%; Unit 3 Revision: 40%. As we move through these assignments, we'll build on our skills from previous units, so grading standards for each subsequent assignment will become more demanding as the course progresses.

Late Work

A third of a letter-grade will be deducted from your revised essay grade for each day that a draft or revision is turned in late. However, I will give every student **one 24-hour extension** on a draft or revision during the semester, no questions asked. If you would like to avail yourself of this one "wildcard" extension, however, you should let me know before the deadline. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you should contact me as soon as possible, and may be required to produce a note from UHS.

Policy on Submissions

You will submit almost all of your work electronically this semester through our course site on Canvas. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word (the file may be of either type .doc or .docx.) It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

Please note that all writing you do for this class is **public**, in the sense that it may be shared with your classmates and may be chosen as an example for us to consider in class. If there is ever a particular piece you *don't* want others to see, please let me know. You may not, however, keep all of your work for the semester private.

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Completion of Work

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be **officially excluded** from the course and given a failing grade.

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. If you are **absent without medical excuse more than twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade. On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within twenty-four hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.



Policy on Collaboration

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, "Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading." However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: In other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Policy on Academic Integrity

Throughout the semester we'll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

If you've read this far in the syllabus, let me know by emailing me your favorite TV show (or you can include this info in your introductory email to me, if you haven't already sent that to me. Thanks for the recommendations!)

Harvard College Honor Code

Harvard requires all students to affirm the Harvard College Honor Code on completion of your coursework. The Writing Program asks students to do so twice during the academic semester: when you submit your draft of Essay 1 and when you submit your revision of Essay 3. Please include the following sentence when you submit these two papers: *I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.* You may submit your affirmation as part of your cover letter, or attach it as a separate page along with your essay.

Course Resources and Readings

All shorter readings for this course are found online in PDF form on our course site on Canvas. For Unit 3, I am arranging a class meeting with the author of *Network Propaganda*, a book that will be published later this month and should retail for around thirty dollars; I will provide more details in October on how and when to purchase this book.

Other writing resources you will want to consult during the semester include:

1. The Harvard Guide to Using Sources: <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>
2. Harvard Writes: <http://harvardwrites.com>
3. And for individual help with any writing assignments, the Harvard Writing Center: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu>