POLITICS AND BULLSHIT

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit.
Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes [their] share.

—Harry G. Frankfurt

FALL 2019

MONDAYS AND WEDNESDAYS
01:00-02:20, EV1 132

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COURSE EPITOME

This course is a seminar in democratic civic engagement, something that was invented
alongside the discipline of rhetoric in ancient Greece. What democracy requires for
success is a vigilant public,—not people who just vote every now and again, or, worse,
people who complain and blame and don’t even vote, but people who know the issues
that matter to them, endorse candidates who best represent those issues, and who
hold their governments accountable for those issues.

But it’s not so easy. Politics is full of bullshit and propaganda, the relentless distortion
of facts and feelings for the aggrandizement of individuals, the enrichment of the few,
and the exercise of power. We will probe politics for these tendencies, and their
inverse, by way of the federal election whose campaign will be run and whose results
will be known in the fall term, 2019, looking especially at the role of participatory
media in the propagation and regulation of bullshit.

With that election in full swing, and with time for a post-mortem, this course will chart
politics and bullshit in real time.

Since this is a seminar, we will all do a lot of reading and talking, with each of you
taking responsibility for bits and pieces of the syllabus. I will talk, probably less than you
want me to at the start, probably more than you want me to at the end, but there will
be no "lectures."

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of 406 are the objectives of liberal arts (the arts of liberty) as a way of
life: the enhancement of critical thinking in both the private sphere (exercising
judgement) and the public sphere (engaging society and culture).

Our specific knowledge outcomes include: how language and imagery shapes belief;
how belief shapes action; the appraisal of credibility; the diagnosis of flawed or
manipulative symbolic structures; the privileges and obligations of rhetorical
citizenship.
COURSE STRUCTURE

The class—you guys, the students—will be divided into two cross-cutting groups, by way of: (1) four representative political parties running candidates in the 2019 Canadian federal election, and (2) the currently most prominent participatory media, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We will monitor and report on the media profiles of the parties, looking for how they situate themselves between evidence-based, policy-geared, honest representations and emotion-driven, attitude-geared, dishonest representations.

After the election, you will provide a post-mortem report on the success and failure and bullshit quotient of the 'your' party, contrasting those features strategically with those of the other parties.

It will be hard to avoid partisanship in this environment, but we will all endeavour to do so. We will cut nobody a break, but neither will we participate in bullshit tactics by distorting and misrepresenting the people and parties involved in the election. And we will always be civil.

TEXTS

Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*

Assorted 'readings' from

1. monitoring your media stream
2. a pool of articles posted to Learn
3. your own research and explorations (if you find something especially good, I'll post it to Learn for everyone)

REQUIREMENTS

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<td>Figure harvesting</td>
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<td>Seminar citizenship</td>
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<td>Bullshit bulletins</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>Post-mortem report</td>
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1 There may be occasions for bringing in the Bloc Québécois into our discussions, but because they do not run candidates across the country and because their issues are dominated by the concerns of one province, I have excluded them from the group assignments.
GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

POLITICAL PARTY

Whatever prior party affiliations you may have need to be parked as effectively as you can park them for the duration of this course. That doesn't mean the issues that may have drawn you to one party or another—the environment, fiscal responsibility, colonialism, education, human rights, access to health care, cultural identity—should be parked. You should continue to care about the universe, your country, and your neighbourhood, and the politics that implicate them.

But you have a specific monitoring role for the duration of this course which may put you at odds with any previous party affiliations. The party to which you have been assigned is 'your' party to the extent that it is your focus: monitor its rhetorical activities, the activities of its partisans, the activities of other parties and partisans directed against it, and its general treatment in the media.

You are expected to become fully versed with the positions of 'your' party. This means research.

PARTICIPATORY MEDIUM

Whatever expertise or affection you may have had, or not had, for one of our three media, you have been randomly assigned to a specific participatory media platform.

You don't need to develop any affection for it—you might even come to loathe it—but you are expected to become an expert in the rhetoric of that medium. This means research.

The three most important canons to which you need to attend in your pursuit of expertise are: invention, style, and delivery. Invention mostly concerns the content and conceptual structure of the post (e.g. argument by comparison or anecdote; appeal to jobs, taxes, or equity). Style concerns the formal characteristics of the post (e.g., for language, use of punctuation, repetition, diction, and so on, that shape the voice; for images, the angle, cropping, and composition, and so on, that shape the point of view; for video (angle, cropping, composition, and so on, but also) the movement, duration, juxtapositions, and so on, that shape the experience). Delivery concerns material constraints and affordances (that all our media accommodate text, images, video, for instance, all have some form of 'liking,' all have hashtag aggregations, all can be accessed by phones, tablets and computers, as affordances; that they all require electricity, the internet, digital encoding, and display appliances, as constraints). They all have specific affordances and constraints as well—Twitter, for instance, has addressivity (affordance) and a character limit (constraint).

You are expected, by the way, to deploy your expertise in both 'your' party and 'your' medium in classroom discussions.
FIGURE HARVESTING

Full disclosure: this component feeds my research as much as it feeds your education.

You will have access to GoFigure, a game that gives you points for finding rhetorical figures and marking off their elements. We will talk about figures a good deal, because they are stylistic epitomes of arguments and encoders of attitude, and the game includes tutorials on core figures. The figures can come from (almost) anywhere, from the course text book, from participatory media, from things you encounter in other classes or in your extracurricular activities. I said "almost:" no poetry or lyrics are allowed (it's too easy); and no previously curated examples are allowed (e.g., from a website or book on figures that gives them as examples).

One crucial aspect of finding and marking figures is that you have to provide evidence, exactly as if you were using a quotation in an essay: they must be cited (author/source, date, page number/time code--though not all three elements are always necessary; websites don't have page numbers, for instance), and a full bibliographic entry must be supplied.

This is a pilot study, so there will be glitches. As we go to press, for instance, there is no way to enter citations for participatory media, so we may have to jerry-rig something.

To get the full 10% in this component, you will need to submit 20 instances or 50 figures, whichever comes first; for 8%, 16 or 42; for 5%, 14 or 36; no grades for under 14 submissions. This is easier than it seems, since most instances contain multiple figures. Here's an example (one instance, but five figures):

INSTANCE:

Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country. (Kennedy [& Sorensen] 1961)

Kennedy, John F. [and Theodore Sorensen]). 1961. Inaugural Address (January 20). The American presidency project [Internet].

FIGURES:

antimetabole Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.

mesodiplosis Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.

epanaphora Ask not your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.

ploke Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.

antithesis Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.
SEMINAR CITIZENSHIP

English 406 is a seminar course. That means the learning is collective, dialogic, and open-ended. Lecturing is minimal; discussion dominates. To learn best and to help others learn, regular, on-point contributions are required from you.

There are also participatory-media opportunities, both on the Learn discussions and by way of the three media we incorporate. For anyone who has particular difficulties speaking in class or posting under their own name, anonymous posting is permitted on the class discussion board and you can always create an avatar that masks your identity on the three media; you will, of course, have to let me know you are responsible for the relevant posts if you want citizenship credit for them.

The hashtag for English 406 is #UW406F19.

BULLSHIT BULLETINS

Each week, your political-party group is responsible for a bullshit bulletin on the rhetorical ecology surrounding ‘your’ party in terms of one medium, analyzing the most important rhetorical activity since the last medium bulletin.

Your group can manage it however you like, but I strongly suggest you have a review policy, with an established time-line (for instance, everyone gets a draft at noon on the day preceding submission and they each have twelve hours to submit comments), and that you assign an editor (possibly rotating) who finalizes the copy for submission. The person in the group responsible for that week’s medium should generate the first draft (content, style, and analysis--this is not a bunch of point-form notes you hand off to others); in groups where there is more than one medium expert, they can either collaborate or alternate.

The last two bulletins, labelled "Comparison shopping," will be comparative surveys of all three media, each getting a bullshit quotient.

Note: while every bulletin will be graded, only the top eight will count towards your grade in this component.

The bulletins should:

- be 300-500 words long
- assign a bullshit quotient (out of 10, up to one decimal point)
- include a clear summarizing appraisal statement
- develop that statement through an analysis of the rhetoric
- provide evidence to support the analysis
The bulletins will be graded on the following rubric:

- Clarity and accuracy of your main claim, 10
- Quality of commentary (coherence, soundness), 30
- Application of relevant concepts, 15
- Use of evidence, 25
- Grammar and style (sentence and paragraph structure, diction, spelling, punctuation, agreement, ...), 20

Every member of the group must submit a memo at the end of the term assigning a numeric grade to every other member of the group, with a sentence or two of justification. Note: you will not receive a grade for this component without submitting a memo.

Your individual grade will be the average of the top 8 submission grades + the average of your groupmates' grades for you ÷ 2.

**POST-MORTEM REPORT**

Your major assignment for the term is, post-election, to write a report on the successes and failures of 'your' party, focussing on rhetoric overall and bullshit specifically, as shaped by (1) the party and its partisans, (2) its opponents, and (3) the media, broadly construed. Consider the rest of the course as a support system for this project.

The report should include analyses of all media (not just the medium assigned to you), and should prominently feature the landmarks of the campaign: any debates, major gaffs or triumphs, stories that are picked up and circulated. For instance, the resignations from cabinet of Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott is sure to be discussed (or conspicuously not discussed) by all parties, and Wilson-Raybould has a book slated to come out in September, entitled *From where I stand*, which promises to take up considerable oxygen.

You do not need to 'apply' a specific rhetorical theory to your analysis, but you should deploy rhetorical methodologies to your analysis, attending to matters of invention, style, and delivery in particular, and using appropriate technical vocabulary. You are welcome to bring in approaches from other rhetoric classes.

The report should:

- be 3000-3500 words long
- adopt a largely essay-style, argument-driven organization, with subheads
- utilize the bullshit bulletins from all class groups (not just your own), properly cited
- rely on academic research for your methodology (minimum of 3 peer-reviewed sources)
The reports will be graded on the following rubric:

- Clarity and accuracy of your standpoint (thesis statement), 10
- Quality of analysis and argumentation (coherence, soundness), 30
- Application of scholarly methodology, 15
- Use of evidence (including research as well as primary data), 25
- Grammar and style (sentence and paragraph structure, diction, spelling, punctuation, agreement, citations, ...), 20

**ACADEMIC ETHICS**

There's nothing special about academic ethics. They're ethics. Treat the universe and its inhabitants well. We just happen to be in an academic corner of that universe. So, there are regulations and policies here, with which you should familiarize yourself. They're in place to help us treat our fellow inhabitants, including those a long way off or a long time dead, whose ideas are still their ideas, with respect and empathy. But it all comes down to this: be **honest**, be **kind**, be **fair**: be a good citizen and a good neighbour and a good person; minimize the bullshit. **Expect those qualities of others**, holding them accountable, not just students but professors as well.

Yes, **professors** as well. One of the reasons I spell things out in this much detail in the syllabus is to be clear about expectations and parameters. If you think any aspect of my conduct, including teaching, marking, and counseling, is unfairly detrimental to you or the class in general, you have not only the right but the obligation to let me, the English Department Chair, or the Dean of Arts, know about it, whomever you are most comfortable speaking with or you feel most appropriate for hearing your views and their reasons. Please keep this obligation with you throughout your time at Waterloo.

The late policy is simple: **don't be**. If personal concerns, including health issues, prevent you from meeting a deadline, contact me ahead of time to make arrangements; if unforeseen circumstances prevent you from meeting a deadline, contact me when you are able and we can work something out. Please note that bad planning, conflict with assignments in other courses, and video-game addictions (to list a few attested reasons offered by students in the past) are not interpretable as personal concerns. Your health, the health of loved ones, unexpected demands in a job, ... these are personal concerns.

**POLICIES AND RESOURCES**

You are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity [check Academic Integrity at UW] to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for your actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the undergraduate Associate Dean. But ignorance is not a defence. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students
should refer to Policy 71, **Student Discipline**. For typical penalties check **Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties**.

**Appeals:** A decision made or penalty imposed under Policy 70 (**Student Petitions and Grievances**) (other than a petition) or Policy 71 (**Student Discipline**) may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes he/she has a ground for an appeal should refer to Policy 72 (**Student Appeals**).

**Grievances:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70, **Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4**. When in doubt please be certain to contact the department’s administrative assistant who will provide further assistance.

**Note for Students with Disabilities:** **AccessAbility Services**, located in Needles Hall, Room 1401, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term.