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 2020

Remote, asynchronous class. Keep safe, stay well.

Randy Harris

RAHA@UWATERLOO.CA (response time: 24hrs)
Cell: (905) 699-7410 (text or phone for time-sensitive matters; otherwise, email)
FB, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM: (@)PROFRAHA
Hashtag: #UW406F20.

Student hours

Wednesday, 1:00-2:00, Virtual classroom

(Officially the Wednesday hours are for my English 306A class, because Virtual classroom doesn’t permit holding office hours for more than one class at a time, but I will post a link on the 406 page that you can use to get 'into' the 306A Virtual classroom; and, of course, I will do the same for 306A students, so they can get 'into' our room.)

Thursday, 1:30-2:30, Virtual classroom

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 in real time for these tendencies, and their inverse, by way of the US federal election whose campaign will be run and whose results will be known in the fall term, 2020, looking especially at the role of participatory media in the propagation and regulation of bullshit.

Unless you are a US citizen (I’m not), this is not your election. You won’t be voting; the history of the county and the structure of its government is different from Canada’s. Why study it then? One of the most obvious reasons is the North American and global influence of the US, but it is also a petri dish of 21st century politics, rife with demagoguery, division, fire-hose propaganda, and, of course, bullshitery. We have all of that on our side of the border, and all of it requires vigilance to protect our democracy and foster governments that serve their citizens—us—in the best, more responsible way.
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 Expectations

Since this is a seminar, we will all do a fair of reading and lots of mutual engagement, with each of you taking responsibility for bits and pieces of the syllabus. I will generate various micro-lectures on the material we take up, addressing the readings, theories, and methods of analysis, to which you will respond with questions and observations. You will also engage each other in discussion threads; some limited anonymity and upvoting/downvoting will be available. Please be stay relevant. Please be courteous.

The class—you guys, the students—has been divided into four participatory media groups that we expect to be active during the election, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and reddit. As a group, you will monitor and report on the rhetorical ecology around the election, looking for how the candidates situate themselves between evidence-based, policy-gear, honest representations and emotion-driven, attitude-gear, dishonest representations, and looking for how the community responds.

I will foreground and encourage two interconnected rhetorical methods in our analysis: Burkean notions of symbolic inducement, and rhetorical figuration. I do so only because in the past students have often floundered trying to find methods and approaches in such courses. But this is an Advanced Rhetorical Study seminar, so you should feel free to draw on theories and methodologies from other courses, previous and current.

Grading will depend on the following requirements:

- Seminar citizenship (posts & responses) 25%
- Bullshit bulletins (posts and presentation) 40%
- Post-mortem report 35%

Texts

Kenneth Burke, Counterstatement and The Philosophy of Literary Form. (The second edition of Counterstatement and the first edition of Philosophy are available in the public domain from Internet Archive and also posted to our Learn site, but you can use any edition of either of them. They are both widely available in multiple editions. I have not ordered either for the UW bookstore.)

Assorted 'readings' from

1. assigned articles and other media artefacts posted to Learn
2. self-selected articles and other media artefacts posted to Learn
3. your own research and explorations (if you find something especially good, I'll post it to Learn for everyone)

4. presidential and vice-presidential candidate debates

Specific readings are assigned up until Reading Week. After Reading Week, we will see where we are. That is why, the schedule is of full of TBA readings. I reserve the right to assign additional readings, but starting 19 October, the current plan is for you to read at least two items per week and dedicate your posts to them (where an item is a peer-reviewed academic article, a long-form journalism essay, or a chapter from a relevant book). Include citations and satisfy the criteria for the discussion board, "Weekly-ish readings," and follow the recurrent deadline (i.e., post by 5 PM Monday each week)

"Lectures"

We are in a weird time. I have never coordinated an asynchronous seminar, but, as you may have heard, there is this pandemic going around. We can't meet in person as we normally would, for discussion and mutual learning. But I have tried to keep the structure of this class as emergent and responsive as possible, adjusting the topics and themes as the election plays out. Nothing, therefore, is canned ahead of time. I will be preparing and releasing video modules on a weekly basis, aiming to have them up each Wednesday.

After Reading week, the schedule is of full of TBA topics; we will see what topics and interest develop.

Seminar citizenship (25%)

English 406 is a seminar course. That means the learning is collective, dialogic, and open-ended. To learn best and to help others learn, you need to make regular, on-point contributions to the discussion boards. Engage the material. Engage your classmates. Engage me.

There are two components to this grade: weeklyish postings and module-based responses.

For anyone who has particular difficulties 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.

Weeklyish postings

The posts are 300-to-500-word (±10%) commentaries or reports. Most of them will be opinionated summaries: synopses of the week's readings, interlarded with some evaluation of the cogency, relevance, and applicability of those readings to the ongoing US election. Take the word count seriously.
Your postings should go on the LEARN course site by 5:00 PM on the Monday before I post on the topic (e.g., 14 September for the 16 September module, 21 September for the 23 September module, etc.). With one exception: the introductory post is due on 11 September. Everyone is expected to read each other’s posts before class; you should also be commenting on one another’s posts.

You need to make seven postings, on whichever weeks you choose, with one exception (the 11 September introductory posting). These need to be on-time and on-spec for you to get credit. You also need to contribute to at least twelve threads on other people’s posts. There are no time or other criteria for these. If you make the seven postings, by their deadlines, and contribute to fourteen threads over the duration of the course, you will get the full 15%. If you make six postings, by their deadlines, and/or eleven thread contributions, you will get 10%. If you make fewer than six postings, or you miss the deadlines, and/or you make fewer than eleven contributions, and/or you don’t meet the specs (including word count) you will get 0% for this component. That’s right, 0%. These posts and contributions are not evaluated in any way.

One posting is mandatory, the first one, which also is due on a Friday, not a Monday; all others are optional.

**Module-based responses**

These correspond roughly to ‘class participation’ activities, except they are time-delayed, there is no class, and you’ll have to wait for a response. Sigh. As with in-class participation, there are no hard and fast rules here, but one or two questions or observations per week, addressed to me or responding to a classmate is a good baseline to keep in mind. These are evaluated for relevance, cogency, and awareness.

**Please drop by**

I have student hours a few hours a week (as above). Please pop in and say hello some time in the first couple of weeks, and please feel free to come by any time throughout the term thereafter to talk about readings, lectures, assignments, relevant political events, and so on.

**Group Assignments (40%)**

Whatever expertise or affection you may have had, or not had, for one of our four 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.

Each group is responsible for three bullshit bulletins (10% each) on the rhetorical ecology surrounding the election on its medium and one summative presentation (10%).

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, security, 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, affordances, incentives, and punishments. (e.g., for Twitter, the 280-character limit is a constraint; the ability to include videos is an allowance; likes and retweets are incentives; tweet removals and account suspensions are punishments). Notice that some functions can fit multiple categories (e.g., for Twitter, replies are an affordance, and might be either incentives or punishments).

Whatever you do, do not forget algorithms in your accounts. They control the propagation of content.

You will also need to identify and (to the extent possible) monitor some of the more prominent partisans or commentators with respect to the election (e.g. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for Tik Tok, Donald Trump Jr. for Instagram). You will present the results of this report in any non-live format you choose: video, narrated power-points, podcast; you can even use your platform to deliver the presentation—a Tweet thread, for instance, or a series of Tik Tok videos.

**Group structure**

Your group can manage it however you like, but I strongly suggest you have a division of labour, with different members responsible for different content; 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.

Each member should ensure that their content is grammatical, cogent, concise, and satisfies the relevant criteria--this is not a bunch of point-form notes you hand off to others.

**BB Criteria**

Bulletin 1 should:

- be 600-800 words (±10%) long
- describe the platform, including any brief history that may be relevant
- outline the constraints, affordances, incentives, and punishments of the platform
- discuss the platform's bullshit-susceptibility
- identify several of the relevant venues or contributors for the election, with some attention to their bullshit propensities
- provide evidence for your claims and analysis
Bulletins 2 & 3 should:

- be 600-800 words (±10%) long
- assign a bullshit quotient (out of 10, up to one decimal point) to the official media presence of each ticket (Trump-Pence, Biden-Harris)
- include a clear summarizing appraisal statement of each ticket justifying the BSQ
- contextualize those statements in the rhetorical ecology of the platform
- provide evidence for your claims and analysis

The bulletins are due 5:00 PM on the Friday of the relevant week (25 September for the Twitter and reddit BB1s, 2 October for the Tik Tok, Instagram BB1s, etc.).

**Take these requirements seriously, including word count.**

**BB Rubric**

The bulletins will be graded on the following rubric:

- Clarity and accuracy of your main claims, 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

**Presentation criteria**

The presentation should:

- be 10-15 long (±10%) long
- feature each group member (audio and/or video)
- summarize the key bullshit-relevant features of the platform and any mechanisms that might be in place (or proposed or possible) to counter or mitigate those features
- illustrate those features with respect to election materials
- argue a position on whether the platform was democratically beneficial or harmful with respect to the election

**Presentation rubric**

The reports will be graded on the following rubric:

- Invention (coherence, soundness, structure, use of evidence), 40
- Style (verbal clarity, liveliness, suitability), 20
Delivery (group ethos, use of chosen medium, incorporation of materials or props), 20
Satisfaction of presentation criteria, 20

Grades

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 assignment grades + the average of your groupmates’ grades for you ÷ 2.

Post-Mortem Report (35%)

Your major assignment for the term is, post-election, to write a report on some aspect of the election in terms of 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: the debates, major gaffs or triumphs, stories that are picked up and circulated.

Both Burke and Frankfurt should feature in your report, and you should pay attention to rhetorical figures, but you should not confine your research to the course readings. You will also need to do additional research into the primary data (the acts, agents, and agencies of the campaign) and into the theory and methods of your analysis.

The report will be a text-based object, though it should include graphics and may include audio and/or video elements as well. The format is up to you.

Report criteria

The report should:

• be 3000-3500 words (±10%) 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)

Report rubric

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.

**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.
## Schedule
*(subject to change)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W1:</td>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post (mandatory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/09-11/09</td>
<td>Course structure</td>
<td>&quot;Literature as equipment for living&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2:</td>
<td>Bullshit</td>
<td>&quot;On bullshit&quot;</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/09-18/09</td>
<td>Scapegoating &amp; negative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>partisanship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical figures</td>
<td>&quot;Hitler’s battle&quot;</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>War of the Words: Schemes and Tropes</td>
<td>BB1: Twitter, reddit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W3:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/09-25/09</td>
<td>Rhetorical form</td>
<td>&quot;Lexicon rhetoricae&quot;</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>Case-Western Debate</td>
<td>BB1: Tik Tok, Instagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W4:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/09-02/10</td>
<td>The pentad</td>
<td>&quot;Container and thing</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>contained&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Utah Debate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W5:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/10-09/10</td>
<td>Reading week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W6:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/10-16/10</td>
<td>Reading week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W7:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19/10-23/10</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Belmont Debate</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BB2: Instagram, Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W8:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26/10-30/10</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BB2: reddit, Tik Tok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W9:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/11-06/11</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Election coverage</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W10:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/11-13/11</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BB3: Twitter, Tik Tok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W11:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/11-20/11</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BB3: Instagram, reddit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W12:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/11-27/11</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W13:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/11-04/12</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Weekly-ish post</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>