

amcult 204 / digital 258 / english 203

bullshit & digital rhetoric

meets: [REDACTED]

hybrid: [REDACTED]

professor: m. remi yergeau // myergeau@umich.edu

remote office hours: [REDACTED]



image: social media icons / [pixabay](https://www.pixabay.com/)

>> course description

Trolling. Disinformation campaigns. Ad hominem attacks. Gaslighting. Obfuscation and pedantry. These things, and more, are modes of address that have come to typify popular representations of social media discourse. In this class, we'll examine the theory and practice of bullshit as it relates to digital rhetoric and online circulation. Among other questions, we'll consider how and where manipulation, truth, and ethos mediate what we popularly describe or understand as bullshit. We'll think together about how complex appeals to lived experience and alternative data circulate among certain communities of practice online, with particular attention paid to anti-vaccination discourse. We'll not only examine what it means to argue on the interwebs, but we'll also ask what it means to imagine digital rhetorical practices that center on questions of ethics, justice, and power.

>> materials

- Readings from [redacted] [bring to class]
- Wordpress account [free]
- You'll need access to a laptop, tablet, or smartphone during both our in-person and remote class sessions

>> participation

Participation is a loaded word. We all have different needs, experiences, and challenges when it comes to discussing and engaging with class material. This is especially thrown into relief given our present circumstances, and it is a challenge we will collectively embark upon during the fall. In our class, we will collaborate to create physical and virtual spaces that enable everyone to contribute meaningfully.

>> collective access

For each assignment, you will be asked to provide textual descriptions of all visuals you submit, as well as captions for all video and audio content you create. Additionally, I hope that, in the course of our time together, we might invent or consider alternative ways of making our projects and in-class activities more accessible, or more collectively designed.

Accessibility and participatory design are not simply topics of discussion or abstract concepts from our daily reading. They are as much lived actions as they are conceptual. As a result, with each project, I expect you to consider critically who your audience is and the ways in which your assignments make a statement, however implicitly, about how you enact accessibility and design in your everyday work.

>> accessibility & accommodations

Services for Students with Disabilities, located in G-664 Haven Hall, offers services for students with documented disabilities. With or without documentation, it is my intent to make our learning experience as accessible as possible. Regardless of whether or not you are registered with SSD, please let me know what we can do to maximize your learning, participation, and general access in this course. You can contact SSD at (734) 763-3000 or <http://ssd.umich.edu/>.

>> assignments

Discussion, workshops, & in-class activities

Much of our time together in class will be structured around discussion and active learning, which will at times involve in-class exercises, reviewing each other's projects-in-progress, internet research, and low-threshold media production/play.

BS-log reading responses (5 posts of 250-400 words each + 5 comments)

Throughout the semester, you will be contributing reading responses to our class blog, known as the **BS-log (bullshit log)**. Over the course of the semester, you will compose five blog posts and five comments on your peers' blog posts. Your first blog post response is due on **Wednesday, September 8**. Your remaining four posts and five comments, however, can be submitted on a rolling deadline throughout the semester. That is: write your responses and comments on days where the readings resonate with you! I would suggest pacing yourself throughout the semester so that you are not writing all of your comments and posts frantically in December. In early November, I will check in with each of you to see how things are going and whether there's anything we can do that would better facilitate an engagement with our readings + digital play.

**** Please note:** We will be using our Wordpress site for more than just reading responses — we'll also be using it for in-class exercises and participation/make-up work for absences. Make-up work and in-class exercises do not count toward your four reading responses or four comments.

Midterm project: Calling bullshit (5-6 pages)

This project provides an opportunity to examine course concepts within a digital text, broadly defined. In particular, you will conduct a rhetorical analysis on a short text of your choosing, and you will consider how power, obfuscation, and manipulation circulate within your chosen text.

Final project: Do(n't) read the comments (length & form varies)

This project offers you an opportunity to draw upon the texts we've encountered this term and to build on theories of ethical rhetoric. Individually or in small groups, you will collaborate on a multimedia project that explores one or more of the following questions: What is digital bullshit, and why does it matter? When might "calling bullshit" overlook or deny individual experience, oppression, and/or trauma? Given these complexities, how might we work toward an ethical theory or practice of digital rhetoric?

discussion & activities	blog responses	midterm project	final project
15%	25%	30%	30%

>> policies and resources

Attendance and class format. I am committed to working with each of you to find attendance options that are as accessible as possible. Our class is a hybrid class. This means that sometimes we will meet in person (in [REDACTED]) and sometimes we will meet online, likely via Zoom. Based on your responses to our class survey, we'll work together to determine the balance of in-person vs. online, as well as formats that best support discussion for us collectively.

As of the writing of this syllabus, I anticipate that we'll begin primarily by meeting in-person, and that we will determine how often we'll meet online based on your needs as well as emergent changes in the pandemic and/or our health.

To facilitate access, all of our class sessions will be recorded. Our attendance policy, then, is that if you miss a session, you will need to watch the recording and make-up participation credit by completing any in-class exercises and leaving a brief comment about the class discussion on our class blog. If you need additional time to do make-up work, please let me know as soon as possible!

Course recordings. In order to create accessible pathways, both our in-person and remote course sessions will be video recorded, and these recordings will be made available to other students in this course via Canvas. If you do not wish to be recorded, please contact me at myergeau@umich.edu during the first week of class (or as soon as you enroll in the course, whichever is latest) to discuss alternative arrangements.

In order to build community and maintain a safe learning space, recordings and transcripts must not be shared, posted, or distributed outside of our class. If you need to share our recordings with a note-taker, transcriptionist, or other intermediary for access needs, please let me know, and we can work to make that happen via secure technology channels.

Deadlines and extensions. At various points during the semester, I will send out polls and surveys about how our workload and schedule feel. Based on your responses, we might make changes/reductions to our curriculum, or revise certain policies. If you need an extension for an assignment, please let me know as soon as you can; where possible, I will grant you an extension!

Academic misconduct. The University of Michigan community functions best when its members treat one another with honesty, fairness, respect, and trust. LSA promotes the assumption of personal responsibility and integrity, and prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct. All cases of academic misconduct will be referred to the LSA Office of the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education. Being found responsible for academic misconduct will usually result in a grade sanction, in

addition to any sanction from the college. For more information, including examples of behaviors that are considered academic misconduct and potential sanctions, please see [Academic Integrity](#).

Writing Center. The Sweetland Center for Writing is available to provide free writing consultation during any stage of the writing process. Sweetland provides support for all multilingual and international undergraduate students, offering a range of credit-bearing courses and sessions at their Writing Workshop and Peer Writing Center. You can find information about Sweetland’s consulting services at <https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/>.

Mental health and well-being. Students may experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and their personal well-being. These may include academic pressures and challenges associated with relationships, mental health, alcohol or other drugs, identities, finances, etc. If you are experiencing concerns, seeking help is a courageous thing to do for yourself and those who care about you. If the source of your stressors is academic, please contact me so that we can find solutions together. For personal concerns, UM offers a variety of resources, many which are listed on the [Resources for Student Well-being webpage](#). You can also search for additional well-being resources [here](#). UM offers several confidential services that you might find helpful, including:

- **Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):** 734-764-8312, <https://caps.umich.edu/>
- **Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC) 24-Hour Crisis Line:** 734-936-3333, <https://sapac.umich.edu/>

As always, please let me know how we can make your class experience more accessible.

[Redacted text block]

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Note: A handful of sessions are currently marked as **Remote** in the schedule below. Remote sessions will take place synchronously via Zoom, unless otherwise noted. All other sessions will meet in person in Mason 3437. This schedule will change as we go – i.e., based on our collective needs and preferences, as well as emergent changes in the pandemic or university policy, we'll move additional sessions online.

Week 1: Welcome!	
M 8/30	<p>██████ (please complete by M 9/6)</p> <p>Onion News Network, "Breaking News: Some Bullshit Happening Somewhere"</p>
W 9/1	<p>Watch Oliver, "Scientific Studies" [NSFW]</p> <p>Read selections from Silva Rhetoricae:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What Is Rhetoric? • Encompassing Terms (click through to kairos, decorum, and audience) • Persuasive Appeals
Week 2: Defining bullshit	
M 9/6	NO CLASS - LABOR DAY
W 9/8 Remote – join class via Zoom!	<p>Blog post #1 due</p> <p>Fredal, "Rhetoric and Bullshit" [Canvas]</p> <p>Smagorinsky et al., "Bullshit in Academic Writing" [Canvas]</p>
Week 3: Internet bullshit	
M 9/13	<p>Bowles, "On Bullshit and the Necessity of Balance" [Canvas]</p> <p>VaxHappened, "We Call Upon Reddit to Take Action"</p> <p>Brodkin, "Reddit Takes a Teach-the-Controversy Approach to the Pandemic and Vaccines"</p>

W 9/15	Sparby, "Digital Social Media and Aggression" [Canvas] boyd, Levy, & Marwick, "The Networked Nature of Algorithmic Discrimination" [Canvas]
Week 4: Algorithmic bullshit	
M 9/20	Golebiewski & boyd, Data Voids , pp. 2-15 Pitcan, " Student Data & Mental Health: What the Blank Spots Say "
W 9/22	Voiovich, " The Bullshit Algorithm " Trice, Potts, & Small, "Values vs. Rules in Social Media Communities" [Canvas]
Week 5: Finding & responding to bullshit	
M 9/27	Purdue OWL, " Logical Fallacies " Huckin, "The Discourse of Condescension" [Canvas]
W 9/29	Brock, "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis" [Canvas]
Week 6: Bullshit & big data	
M 10/4	Bergstrom & West, "Calling Bullshit on Big Data" [Canvas] boyd & Crawford, "Six Provocations for Big Data" [Canvas]
W 10/6	Workshop! Draft of midterm project due
Week 7: Bullshit & demagoguery	
M 10/11	Rangappa & Mercieca, " The Ancient Greeks' Guide to Rejecting Propaganda and Disinformation " Roberts-Miller, "Democratic Deliberation" (from <i>Demagoguery & Democracy</i> , pp. 10-20) [Canvas]
W 10/13	Hedengren, " Dissoi Logoi " (Mere Rhetoric podcast) Blankenship, "Epilogue: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy" [Canvas]

Week 8: Systemic bullshit	
M 10/18	NO CLASS - FALL BREAK
W 10/20 Remote – join class via Zoom!	Raji, " How Our Data Encodes Systemic Racism " Rauchberg, " TikTok's Digital Eugenics "
Week 9: Bullshit & (networked) enthymemes	
M 10/25	Benkler et al., "Epistemic Crisis" (ch. 1 in <i>Network Propaganda</i>) [Canvas] Midterm project due
W 10/27	Mercieca, " America is in the Middle of a Battle Over the Meaning of Words Like 'Diversity' " Rice, "Disgusting Bullshit" [Canvas]
Week 10: Bullshit & science	
M 11/1	Ceccarelli, "Manufactured Scientific Controversy" [Canvas]
W 11/3	Michaels & Monforton, "Manufacturing Uncertainty" [Canvas] Watch Bee, " Anti-Anti-Vaxxers " [NSFW]
Week 11: Hesitancy, empathy, & persuasion	
M 11/8	Lawrence, "Retaining Persuasion" (from <i>Vaccine Rhetorics</i> , pp. 1-23) [Canvas]
W 11/10	Hausman & Lawrence, " Vaccine Dissent and the Challenges of Solidarity in a Pandemic " Sobo, Schow, & McClure, " US Black and Latino Communities Often Have Low Vaccination Rates – But Blaming Vaccine Hesitancy Misses the Mark "
Week 12: Disinformation & ethos	
M 11/15	Baniya & Potts, "Valuing Expertise During the Pandemic"

	Marwick & Lewis, Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online
W 11/17	Final project proposals due!
Week 13: Visualizing bullshit	
M 11/22 Remote – join class via Zoom!	Bergstrom & West, " Tools & Tricks " [for spotting bullshit]
W 11/24	NO CLASS - BREAK
Week 14: Workshopping & studio time	
M 11/29	Workshop - drafts-in-progress due!
M 12/1	Workshop - drafts-in-progress due!
Week 15: Sharing	
M 12/6	Presentations
W 12/8	Presentations
Finals week	
M 12/20	Final projects due