

LYING AND PUBLIC POLICY: PP 474:001

Winter 2020

M/W 1:00 – 2:20

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Office: 3215 Weill Hall
Mon: 2:30 – 3:30
Wed: 11:00 – 12:00

Introduction

Lying has been getting a lot of attention lately and for good reason. Democracies demand the truthful exchange of information between rulers and the ruled—as well as a healthy media to inform the public on matters related to government and policy. Lying therefore poses a legitimate threat to the political stability of our nation. And yet despite the current ubiquity of terms like ‘post-truth’ and ‘alternative facts,’ lying is not a twenty-first century cultural or political aberration—lying permeates the fabric not only of American society but every society, playing a significant role in our daily conversations with others and with ourselves. As abundant research has shown, we lie daily—to avoid social embarrassment or hurting others’ feelings, or to manipulate situations for our own gain. Moreover, political philosophers like Plato have argued that lying is an essential tactic in the ruler’s toolkit, used to preserve social cohesion or persuade the public to agree with a policy that, in the ruler’s opinion, may be for the social good. Lying can also be necessary to protect the oppressed from exploitation or abuse. In this values and ethics course, we will read broadly in literature, philosophy, history, and politics in order, first, to define the different forms of deception, then to understand how various ethical frameworks may help us to determine when (if ever) lying is justified. Then we will apply these lessons to examine important policy topics of our own era, including nationalistic myths, passing, propaganda, Russian election interference, fake news, and the extent to which lying compromises government services such as education, voting, and the police.

Required Texts

Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*

George Orwell, *1984*

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Grading

- Class attendance and participation, quizzes 20%
- Policy memo 20%
- Group Project 60%
 - Individual paper [inventing a political lie] 15%
 - Individual paper [political strategy] 15%
 - Twitter war 5%
 - Group presentation 10%
 - Final group paper 15%

Attendance and Participation

Although I will lecture on occasion, this will predominately be a discussion-based class. That is, I place a premium on your honest contributions to our conversations about dishonesty. Note, however, that I'll be judging you on the *quality* of your comments, as much if not more than the *quantity*. You don't have to be brilliant, just thoughtful.

Needless to say, you need to be here in order to participate. More than two unexcused absences will lower your grade. Three or more unexcused absences may result in failure or a request that you withdraw from the course. Excused absence means illness or a death in the family. You don't need to provide me with a note from a doctor or relevant authority, because, contrary to the prevailing spirit of this class, I trust you. (Besides, why ask for a note when it could very well be forged?) If you know you're going to miss, let me know ahead of time, otherwise, contact me as soon as possible.

Electronic Devices

No smart phones. Laptops are allowed only to refer to course reading materials (if you prefer not to print). However, note-taking should be done by hand—as the research shows, you'll learn more this way (look it up).

Quizzes

I reserve the right to administer quizzes, a harsh medicine, but one necessary to insure against the disease of non-reading. These will work in the following way: at the beginning of class, I will ask you to take a few minutes to write a short answer to a question pertaining to the assigned reading. These will be graded on a check-plus, check, check-minus scale, and will contribute to your class participation grade.

Ford School Inclusivity Statement

Members of the Ford School community represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We are committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

- share your unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of your colleagues
- appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other
- value one another's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
- use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in Ford classes and across the UM community.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you believe you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of the course may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, I can work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office to help determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information you provide will be treated as private and confidential.

Student Mental Health and Well-Being Resources

The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. We acknowledge that a variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, and depression, directly impacts students' academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS) and/or [University Health Service](#) (UHS). For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit: <http://umich.edu/~mhealth/>

A Note on Plagiarism

This is a course in which we will not only be learning about dishonesty, but practicing it as well, as we study and imitate the strategic deceitfulness of our nation's leaders and punditry. Therefore, you might get the idea that practicing the form of academic dishonesty known as plagiarism might be condoned in this course because, hey, it's all in the name of learning, right?

Allow me to suggest a better way of looking at it. I've been studying dishonesty—and how to spot it—quite a bit of late. Don't test me. A student who plagiarizes will automatically receive an "E" for the course, in addition to any actions taken by the appropriate university committee. Please refer to: <http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations> and <http://www.rackham.umich.edu/current-students/policies/academic-policies/section11#112>.

A Note on the Writing Center

As I will continue to offer tutorial hours at the Ford School Writing Center through the Winter term, I am happy, during my regular scheduled Writing Center hours, to read your work—*except your work for this course*. If you would like the Writing Center to read your papers for this course, please make an appointment with the other Writing Center instructors, Molly Spencer or Beth Chimera. If you would like to discuss your work for this course with me, please come see me during my course office hours or contact me for an appointment. I won't read a complete draft of your paper, but I will read outlines and selected paragraphs, or discuss your ideas. To make an appointment with Molly or Beth (which I strongly recommend): <http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/writing-center/>

PHILOSOPHICAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL/BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8

Introduction: the liar as trickster/rebel/cultural icon

Adam and Eve; Jacob and Esau; Odysseus, Brer Rabbit, et al.

MONDAY, JANUARY 13

Is lying inevitable/unavoidable? Are we all natural-born liars?

- David Livingstone Smith, *Why We Lie*, chapter 2, pp. 29 – 49
- Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity*, excerpt from chapter 1, pp. 19 - 46
- Dan Ariely, *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty*, Introduction and chapter 1, “Testing the Simple Model of Rational Crime (SMORC),” pp. 1 - 29

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15

What are the different types of dishonesty? What is the difference between a lie and a falsehood?

- Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, Preface to the 1999 edition, Introduction, pp xxvii -xxxiv and chapter one, pp 3-16
- Thomas L. Carson, *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice*, chapter 1, “Lying,” pp. 15 – 45

MONDAY, JANUARY 20

No Class: MLK Day

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22

What are the motives/justifications for lying? The Deontological Perspective

- Immanuel Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives,” excerpted in Bok, *Lying*, pp. 267 - 272
- Sissela Bok, *Lying*, chapter 2, “Truthfulness, Deceit, and Trust” and chapter 3, “Never to Lie?” pp. 17 – 46; chapter 6, “Excuses,” pp. 73 – 89.

Extra (voluntary) reading:

- Thomas L. Carson, *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice*, chapter 3, “Kant and the Absolute Prohibition against Lying,” pp. 67 – 88

MONDAY, JANUARY 27

What are the motives/justifications for lying? The Utilitarian Perspective

- Sissela Bok, *Lying*, chapter 4, “Weighing the Consequences,” pp. 47 – 56 and chapter 7, “Justification,” pp. 90 – 106.
- Jeremy Bentham, excerpt from *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 1: “The Principle of Utility” (skip Preface)
- John Stuart Mill, excerpt from “Utilitarianism,” Chapter 2

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29

What are the motives/justifications for lying? The Extramoral [Amoral] Perspective

- Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” from *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 42 – 47
- Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, “Reality Show Russia,” pp. 35 – 76; and “Forms of Delirium,” pp. 228 – 239

Extra (voluntary) reading:

- Nietzsche, excerpts from *The Will to Power*, pp. 146 – 169.

LYING AND THE SELF

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3

On Passing: When do external [social/systemic] pressures justify presenting yourself as someone else?

- Nella Larsen, *Passing*
- [Memo-writing exercise]

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5

Self-deception: Is it possible to deceive ourselves? How and why do we do it?

- Dan Ariely, chapter 6, “Cheating Ourselves” and chapter 7, “Creativity and Dishonesty: We are all Storytellers,” from *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty*, pp 141 – 189
- Evelin Sullivan, “Deep Down, I Knew.....,” from *The Concise Book of Lying*, pp. 162 – 186

LYING AND POLITICS

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10

Why do politicians lie? Is the practice of politics inherently dishonest?

- Hannah Arendt, “Truth in Politics”
- Plato, “The Noble Lie” from *The Republic*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 12

The Fantasy of the Truthful [Authentic] Politician

- Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* excerpt, “Willie Stark Tells It Like It Is,” pp 68 - 98
- David Foster Wallace, “The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub” (aboard the ‘Straight Talk Express’ with John McCain), *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2000. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/david-foster-wallace-on-john-mccain-the-weasel-twelve-monkeys-and-the-shrub-194272/>

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17

National identity, myth making, and hero worship

- James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, chapter 1, “Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-making,” pp. 11 – 30; and chapter 2, “1493: The True Importance of Christopher Columbus,” pp. 31 – 69.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19

Vladimir Putin: Master of “Implausible Deniability”

- Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, chapter two, “Succession or Failure,” pp. 37 – 66, and chapter five, “Truth or Lies,” pp 159 – 215

Extra (voluntary) reading:

- Maria Bustillos, “When Truth Falls Apart,”
<https://www.theawl.com/2016/11/when-truth-falls-apart/#.ilj4so42t>

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24

The lie deployed as political weapon, part one—case study: Russia, the CIA, and the origins of the AIDS epidemic

- Allan M. Brandt, “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study,” *The Hastings Center Report* 8(6): 21-29.
- Adam B. Ellick and Adam Westbrook, “Operation Infektion: Russian Disinformation: From Cold War to Kanye,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html> [Watch the first episode]
- Erhard Geissler, “The AIDS Myth at 30,” *International Journal of Virology and AIDS*, Vol 3, Issue 1, March 3, 2016.
- Thomas Boghardt, “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Dec. 2009

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26

The lie deployed as political weapon, part two—case study: “Death Panels”

- Betsy McCaughey, “GovernmentCare’s Assault on Seniors.” *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2009.
- Catharine Richert, “McCaughey claims end-of-life counseling will be required for Medicare patients,” *Politifact*, July 23, 2009.
- Brendan Nyhan, “Why the Death Panel Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate,” *The Forum*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2010
- David M. Frankford, “The Remarkable Staying Power of Death Panels,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, Vol. 40, No. 5, October 2015
- Regina Lawrence and Matthew Schafer, “Sarah Palin’s 2009 ‘death panel’ claims: How the media handled them, and why that matters,” *Nieman Lab.org*
- Atul Gawande, “Letting Go: What Should Medicine Do When It Can’t Save Your Life?” *New Yorker*, August 2, 2010

WINTER BREAK

MONDAY, MARCH 9

The lie deployed as political weapon, part three—Fake News

- Dean Jackson, “The ‘Demand Side’ of the Disinformation Crisis” from The National Endowment for Democracy, August 2, 2018, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-the-demand-side-of-the-disinformation-crisis/>
- Benedict Carey, “How Fiction Becomes Fact on Social Media,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2017
- Robinson Meyer, “The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News,” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2018
- Renee DiResta, et al., “The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,” a report on Russian interference in the US 2016 election by New Knowledge, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and Canfield Research

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

What are the most effective methods for debunking political misinformation? Why do debunking attempts often fail—or backfire?

- Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, Jason Reifler, Thomas J. Wood, “Taking Corrections Literally but Not Seriously? The Effects of Information on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability”
- John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, “The Debunking Handbook,” St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland, January 23, 2012
- Daniel Engber, “LOL Something Matters,” *Slate* online, January 3, 2018. <https://slate.com/health-and-science/2018/01/weve-been-told-were-living-in-a-post-truth-age-dont-believe-it.html>
- Whitney Phillips, “The Forest and the Trees: Proposed Editorial Strategies,” part three from *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online*. Published by Data & Society.

MONDAY, MARCH 16

Lying and the Presidency, part one

- <https://politics.theonion.com/report-presidents-washington-through-bush-may-have-lie-1819566677>
- George W. Bush and the Iraq War—Chapter 8, “Selling the War in Iraq” and Chapter 9, “Revising the Record on Iraq” from Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan, *All the President’s Spin*, pp. 143~217.
- Eric Alterman, excerpt from Chapter VI, “George W. Bush and the Post-Truth Presidency,” from *When Presidents Lie*, pp. 306~314.
- Christopher Hitchens and George Galloway, “The War Over the Iraq War,” *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2005.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

Lying and the Presidency, part two: How do President Trump's lies differ from those of previous presidents? What is the source of their appeal?

- Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*
- Oliver Hahl, Minjae Kim, and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy," *American Sociological Review*
- Daniel Dale, "815 false claims: The staggering scale of Donald Trump's pre-midterm dishonesty," *Toronto Star*, November 15, 2018

LYING AND POLICY

MONDAY, MARCH 23

Playing the Con Game

- READ: Jia Tolentino, "The Story of a Generation in Seven Scams," from *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, pp. 157 – 195.
- READ: Megan Garber, "The Scams are Winning," from *The Atlantic*, April 5, 2019; <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/04/the-mueller-report-theranos-billions-american-scams/586297/>
- WATCH: (half the class) *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (HBO documentary on Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos)
- WATCH: (other half of the class) *Fyre Fraud* (Hulu documentary on Billy McFarland and the Fyre Festival)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

Lying and the Police, part one

- Fred E. Inbau, *Criminal Interrogation and Confessions*, pp. 68 – 76 and pp. 92 – 127
- Joseph Goldstein, "He Excelled as a Detective, Until Prosecutors Stopped Believing Him," *New York Times*, October 10, 2017
- *The New York Times* "Blue Lies" series, by Joseph Goldstein
 - Part one: "Testilying by Police: A Stubborn Problem"
 - Part two: "Promotions, not Punishments, for Officers Accused of Lying"
 - Part three: "Testilying Remains a Stubborn Problem. Here's How the System Could Reduce It"

MONDAY, MARCH 30

Lying and the Police, part two: "The bigger the lie, the more they believe."

- Watch: *The Wire*, season five:
 - episode two, "Unconfirmed Reports"
 - episode three, "Not for Attribution"
 - episode six, "The Dickensian Aspect"
 - episode seven, "Took"
 - episode ten, "—30—"

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

Juking the stats

- Linda Darling-Hammond, “Performance-Based Assessment and Education Equity.” In the *Harvard Educational Review*, Spring 1994.
- Rachel Aviv, “Wrong Answer,” *New Yorker*, July 21, 2014.
- *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution's* “Cheating Our Children” series
 - Part one: Suspicious scores across the nation
 - Part two: Suspect scores at premier schools
 - Part three: Help on tests can cross the line
 - Part four: Cheating thrives, investigations languish
 - Part Five: States can't ensure test integrity

MONDAY, APRIL 6

Lying and Revolution

- Rigoberta Menchu, excerpts from *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*
- Various authors to be determined

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8

Case Study: Voting Fraud (and Election Fraud) in Alabama and North Carolina

- Lorraine C. Minnite, Chapter 1: “Introduction: Voter Fraud and the Dynamics of Electoral Mobilization,” from *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, pp. 1~18.
- Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Battle for North Carolina,” *The Atlantic*, October 27, 2016.
- David A. Graham, “North Carolina’s Deliberate Disenfranchisement of Black Voters,” *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2016.
- Colin Campbell, “Tallying NC voter fraud: Felons, non-citizens and a dutiful daughter whose mom died,” *News and Observer*, April 21, 2017.
- Craig Timberg, Tony Romm, Aaron C. Davis, and Elizabeth Dvoskin, “Secret campaign to use Russian-inspired tactics in 2017 Ala. election stirs anxiety for Democrats,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2019.
- <https://medium.com/@jeffgiesea/breaking-heres-the-after-action-report-from-the-alabama-senate-disinformation-campaign-e3edd854f17d>

MONDAY, APRIL 13

Why and how do governments lie? What are the uses of political lying and what are the effects on the populace? Just how bad can it get anyway?

- George Orwell, *1984*, part one

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15 and MONDAY, APRIL 20

Group projects