



PROGRAM: Bachelor's degree course in Digital Innovation and Communication (L 20)

MODULE: Media and Religion (M-STO/07)

ECTS: 6

YEAR RUNNING: 2022/2023

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CONSULTATION TIME: Consultation hours take place after class

LEARNING AND SKILLS OUTCOMES:

The teaching module aims to increase knowledge of the EU policies both on misinformation and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In fact, it is a part of the "Jean Monnet" project FreeBeRI ("Freedom of Belief and Right to Information") funded by the European Union, which intends to increase awareness on the mutual reliance between freedom of religion and freedom of expression and information.

In this sense, the module addresses:

- 1) the knowledge gap on the role and relevance of religious issues in the history of EU;
- 2) the knowledge gap on EU studies in students of Digital Innovation and Communication;
- 3) the challenges of conspiracy theories by enhancing critical thinking skills and providing students with fundamental tools for recognizing, analyzing, debunking conspiracy theories as well as understanding the reason for their success.

As a consequence, the specific learning objectives are formulated by following the Dublin descriptors with particular emphasis on:

- a) the Dublin descriptor "knowledge and understanding": knowing the EU policies on misinformation and freedom of religion and understanding the mutual reliance of those policies; knowing the current main theoretical understandings of the relationship between conspiracy theories and religions; understanding the historical connections and discontinuities between new conspiracy theories and old ones (with specific reference to the anti-Semitic propaganda forgery of the protocols of the elders of Zion); knowing the ways in which some prominent historians have interpreted fake news and conspiracy theories;
- b) the Dublin descriptor "applying knowledge and understanding": being able to apply the methodological notions, provided by the module, to different kinds of sources (Internet sources included) by contextualizing, analyzing, and interpreting them;
- c) the Dublin descriptor "making judgments": being able to use the methodological tools provided by the course for recognizing, understanding, analyzing, and debunking conspiracy

theories.

Method:

The teaching method adopted by the course is meant to enable students to achieve the learning objectives at least satisfactorily (18 p.). Indeed, lessons will be carried out according to three methods:

- 1) lectures in which the teacher will explain the topics and the tools provided by the module;
- 2) peer learning in the form of workshop in which students will apply the notions and the methodological tools of the module while coping with different kinds of sources;
- 3) Flipped classroom through which students will learn to expose their analysis of different kinds of sources, based on the notions and the tools of the module.

During the classes, **students are required to:** actively contribute to class discussions and workshop; write a short paper; expose at least one presentation.

Students' active participation allows continuous assessment of their learning progress, which will be conducted by rating their performances following the same criteria of grade determination adopted for the final exam (see below). That process also enables the teacher to better address the specific learning and training needs of the students during the course. Besides, FreeBeRI carries out a series of research activities and dissemination events revolving around the topics of the teaching module. Those activities/events are meant to be a stimulating and rich learning environment in which students are actively involved as auditors, speakers, and/or discussants and have the opportunity to interact with the research network provided by FreeBeRI.

SYLLABUS

The topics covered by the module are the following:

- a terminological framework: disinformation/misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, post-truth;
- current conspiracy theories between secular skepticism and spiritual salvation;
- a long-lasting conspiracy theory: the anti-Semitic propaganda forgery of the protocols of the elders of Zion;
- writing the story of the protocols of the elders of Zion: Eco's *Il Cimitero di Praga* (2010) and its reception in religious oriented newspapers;
- true, false, fictive, fake news and conspiracy theories according to Marc Bloch and Carlo Ginzburg;
- mutual reliance between freedom of religion and freedom of expression and information, as indicated by *EU guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief* (art. 31), *EU guidelines*, and *the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU* (art. 10, 21, 21), as well as stated by the *European Convention on Human Rights*, the *Charter of Fundamental Rights and The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*;
- current EU instruments against disinformation: the functions of the Strategic Communications Division of the European External Action Service's (EEAS); *The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation* (2018); *EU Action Plan Against Disinformation* (2018); *EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech* (2019); the East StratCom Task Force, the Rapid Alert System.

In order to provide the students with the **methodological tools** related to the topics of the module, a workshop will be carried out throughout the course, which will be focused on the tools of the "historian's craft" for contextualizing, analyzing, and interpreting sources. The practice exercises of the workshop will be created by the teacher or taken from the sources enlisted below (see *Tools*) and will be meant to learn how to recognize, understand,

analyze, and debunk conspiracy theories.

METHOD OF ASSESSMENT

Students will take an oral exam. The examination will start with the discussion of the paper or presentations prepared by the student during the course. After the discussion, the student must be able to answer questions about all the topics covered by the module and compulsory texts.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The exam aims to assess the acquisition and correct use of:

- a) the basic notions related to the EU policies on misinformation and freedom of religion; the fundamental current theoretical understandings of the relationship between conspiracy theories and religions; the fundamental similarities and differences between new conspiracy theories and old ones (with specific reference to the anti-Semitic propaganda forgery of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion); the basic ways in which some prominent historians have interpreted fake news and conspiracy theories ("knowledge and understanding");
- b) a basic methodological framework useful for understanding different kinds of sources (Internet sources included) by contextualizing, analyzing, and interpreting them ("applying knowledge and understanding");
- c) the basic theoretical and methodological tools provided by the course in order to recognize, understand, analyze, and debunk conspiracy theories ("making judgments").

MARKING CRITERIA

The overall student's performance will be rated from 18 (passing grade) to 30 (excellent). To measure the achievement of the learning objectives, the grade determination of the final exam will be based on the following criteria: a) "knowledge and understanding" (MIN.: 6 – MAX.: 10 p.); b) "applying knowledge and understanding" (MIN.: 6 – MAX.: 10 p.); c) "making judgments" (MIN.: 6 - MAX: 10 p.).

READING LIST

Mandatory books / chapters / articles to study:

Bloch Marc, *Reflections of a Historian on the False News of the War*, «Michigan War Studies Review», 2013 [1921], pp. 1-11, trans. from the French by James P. Holoka.

Bloch Marc, *The Historian's Craft*, Knopf, New York, 1953 [1949], trans. from the French by Peter Putnam.

Dyrendal Asbjørn, Robertson David G., Aspren Egil (eds.), *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2019 (Chapters: 1 "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What we are Talking about, and Why it is Important"; 2 "Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation").

Giusti Serena, Piras Elisa (eds.), *Democracy and Fake News : Information Manipulation and Post-truth Politics*, (Chapters: Introduction. In search of Paradigms: Disinformation, Fake News, and Post-truth Politics; 13 Radical-Right Political Activism on the Web and the Challenge for European Democracy; 16 The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and the Risk of the Privatisation of Censorship).

Ginzburg Carlo, *Threads and Traces. True False Fictive*, University of California Press,

Berkeley, 2012 [2006], trans. from the Italian by Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (chapters: 1 "Description and Quotation", 10 "Representing the Enemy: On the French Prehistory of the Protocols").

N.B. Students who will not attend classes or expose at least a presentation and write a short paper must study also this book:

- Roy Olivier, *Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – London 2013 [2008], trans. from the French by Ros Schwartz.

Readings:

- Suggested: Boltanski Luc, *Mysteries and Conspiracies, Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2014 (chapters: 1, 5, 6).
- Suggested: Eco Umberto, *How to Write a Thesis*, MIT, Cambridge – London 2015 [1977] (trans. from the Italian by Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina).
- **Mandatory:** Eco Umberto, *Il cimitero di Praga*, Bompiani, Milano 2010 (trans. from the Italian by Richard Dixon, *The Prague Cemetery*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2011).
- Suggested: Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Quomplotto. QAnnon e dintorni. Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema*, Alegre, Roma 2021.

Newspaper reviews (online or provided by the teacher):

- Di Segni Riccardo, *Il libro – Il cimitero di Praga: Domande senza risposta*, «pagine ebraiche», n. 11 novembre 2010, pp. 28-31.
- Foa Anna, *Il libro – Il cimitero di Praga: La micidiale macchina del falso*, «pagine ebraiche», n. 11 novembre 2010, pp. 28-29.
- Newberger Goldstein Rebecca, *Umberto Eco and the Elders of Zion*, «The New York Times», <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/books/review/the-prague-cemetery-by-umberto-eco-book-review.html>>
- Taguieff Pierre-André (interviewed by Paoli Paul-François), "Eco peut-il écrire ce qu'il veut?", 17/03/2011, «Le Figaro». <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2011/03/17/03005-20110317ARTFIG00477-eco-peut-il-ecrire-ce-qu-il-veut.php>>
- Scaraffia Lucetta, *Il Voyeur del male*, «Osservatore Romano», 30 ottobre 2010.
- Vitale Guido, *Umberto Eco: "Smaschero le trame di chi costruisce l'odio". Antisemitismo e fabbrica dei falsi. Il più affermato intellettuale italiano racconta a Pagine Ebraiche il suo nuovo libro*, «pagine ebraiche», n. 11 novembre 2010, pp. 6-9.
- Volli Ugo, *Il libro – Il cimitero di Praga: Il veleno del serpente. Una denuncia dell'antisemitismo che si destreggia con materiali pericolosi*, «pagine ebraiche», n. 11 novembre 2010, pp. 30-31.

Tools:

- Bourbaki Nicoletta – Collettivo di ricerca sui falsi storici, (a cura), *Questo chi lo dice? E perché? Una guida per la fruizione critica delle fonti fuori e dentro il web. Con esempi e proposte di esercizi didattici*, 2018 <<https://fdocumenti.com/document/questo-chi-lo-dice-e-perche-newspdf-insegnare-a-rapportarsi-criticamente.html>>;
- <https://eavi.eu/beyond-headlines-online-news-verification-game/>
- <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>
- <https://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>