

**1280C: Topics in Cognition
Information & Decision Making
Spring 2024**

Subject to change; Revision date: 1/25/2024

Time: T/Th 2:30-3:50pm
Location: List Art Center 210

Instructor: Molly Moore
molly_moore1@brown.edu
Office hours: 10-11am Thursdays in Metcalf
Research Building 313

Course description

Why do people expose themselves primarily to media that aligns with their prior beliefs? When two people from opposing political parties read the same exact news article, how can they end up with even stronger conflicting opinions? What underlying mechanisms might be driving people's decisions to post specific clickbait on Facebook? Despite the fact that neoclassical economic theory dictates that individuals should seek out a diverse array of information in order to make the best judgments and decisions, there is abundant evidence that they do not. We will explore these types of questions throughout this course as we investigate how people engage with information across three distinct stages: exposure to, consumption of, and sharing of information. Through the readings and discussion, you will be exposed to relevant literatures in decision science, experimental economics, behavioral economics, and social psychology.

Learning Goals: To identify the complexity and puzzling nature of how people approach and respond to information in their environment; To learn how to engage with, evaluate, and critique peer-reviewed research papers; To identify and clearly communicate a novel research idea.

Evaluation

	Percentage of Grade
Course participation	15
Leading one class discussion	5
Short response prompts	10
Two referee reports	30
Final research paper	35
Final presentation	5

Participation (15%): As a small seminar, this course depends on vibrant and respectful discussion. To facilitate this, participation is a mandatory component. You are expected to have read all required readings before each class, and to come to class prepared to discuss these readings. Your participation will be evaluated subjectively based on an assessment of your familiarity with the required readings and the quality of the insights you convey. This will be evaluated on a 0, check, check+ basis for each class. Great comments made either in class or in office hours will count towards your grade. Inherently, this means that a lack of attendance will negatively affect your grade. Feel free to come to office hours if you'd like to check in on this portion of the grade midway through semester.

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Leading class discussion (5%): You will sign up to (co-)lead the class discussion once over the course of the semester. This will involve detailed presentation of the readings for that day and leading a discussion over the contribution, limitations and connections to previous course concepts. This involves not only speaking to the results of the paper(s), but asking thought-provoking questions for the class to debate. You may review these sign ups [here](#).

Short response prompts (10%): Most weeks, you will be expected to respond to prompt questions via the discussion board on canvas by 11:59pm Monday evening. These questions will be posted after class on Tuesdays and will be based on the week's readings or prior class discussions. They will be graded on a pass/fail basis. You are permitted to drop one during the semester. If you have an emergency that prevents you from turning in two or more prompts, come chat with me.

Referee Reports (2-4 pages each, 30%): Over the course of the semester, each student will be responsible for two referee reports. A referee report should briefly summarize an article, outline the contribution it makes to the literature, and then identify the piece's potential empirical or conceptual shortcomings. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) below are the readings on which these will be focused.

Final research paper (35% total, broken down below): The creative climax this course is your final research paper, where you will address a research question of your choosing under the broader topic of decision making and information. You will be asked to submit a series of assignments that will help you prepare for your final research paper.

Research questions and a one-on-one meeting (3%): Prepare three (or more) options for research questions that you might want to tackle in your final research paper. I will meet individually with students for 10-15 minutes the week of March 18th to discuss these topics and how you might address them.

Literature review (4-5 pages, 6%): Select one research question for your final paper. Here you will provide a brief motivation for why this question is important, and explain how this project fits into existing literature.

Model or Methodology (3-5 pages, 6%): This will describe your main contribution, or how you are extending beyond prior literature. If you are writing a theory paper, this is where you will present a draft of the model. If you are designing an experiment, this is where you will draft the experimental design. Note: if you proposing an experiment and are interested in collecting data, you may be eligible to apply to the College for a small amount of funding [here](#).

Final paper (15-18 pages, 20%): This is the final product to be turned in.

Final Presentation (5%): Presenting your research – even when it is incomplete! – is an essential part of the research process. The final three classes of the semester will be devoted to 8-10 minute

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student presentations. You are also expected to actively engage with your peers when they present, providing feedback and questions during their presentations.

Extra Credit (2%): You can earn up to two extra credit percentage points in the course by sending in a popular press article describing a real-world application of the course material. Please send the article to me via email and attach an explanation 1-2 paragraphs in length regarding which course concept you believe to be well-illustrated by your example. Each article accompanied by a cogent explanation will receive a 1% boost. These must be sent before the final class.

Course policies

Late Assignments. Please discuss extensions with me in advance. Be aware that you cannot get an extension on the final paper.

Correspondence. You can expect a response to emails within 24 business hours. Please include the course number 1280C in the subject line for all emails so they don't get lost in my inbox. Additionally, I highly encourage you to schedule office hours to come chat with me about the course, readings, your final project, advice for other classes or academic life in general!

Laptops. As this is a discussion-based class, I ask that you refrain from use of laptops during class unless needed to explicitly reference a reading or assignment.

Food. You may bring food or drink. We will aim for an informal atmosphere of discussion in sections. If it becomes too much of a distraction, we will readdress this as a group. If you have any allergies or concerns with this policy, please let me know.

Academic honesty. It's required to say something like, "discussing ideas and work-in-progress with others is an important and desirable part of the research process, but in the end, your assignment must be your own effort, written by you, and based on your own thinking. All assignments must use appropriate citation practices to acknowledge sources you've consulted." If you're worried you might be violating these policies for any reason, come chat with me and we'll work together to ensure that you're not.

Accessibility and Accommodations Statement. Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to Student Accessibility Services (SAS) for their assistance (seas@brown.edu, 401-863-9588). Students in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact one of the academic deans in the College.

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Course Registration. Due to the discussion-based nature of this course, there will be a cap imposed of 24 students. Preference will be given to seniors and juniors in the Behavioral Decision Making track and those students with a background in the relevant material. Prerequisites include one of the following courses: Making Decisions, Introduction to Cognitive Psychology or Introduction to Social Psychology.

Due dates

Assignment	Date
Referee Report #1	Feb 27 th
Referee Report #2	March 14 th
Research questions	March 18 th – March 22 nd
Literature Review	April 4 th
Model or Methodology	April 18 th
Final research project	May 7 th

Very Approximate Time Requirements:

- Time in class (3 hours/week); reading (about 4 hours/week); weekly assignments (1 hours/week); prep for leading the class discussion (15 hours); writing referee reports (20 hours); writing the final paper and related assignments (40 hours)
- Total is about 195 hours

Course schedule and reading list

All course readings will be uploaded to Canvas and there will be no textbook or financial cost associated with this class. If you have trouble accessing any readings, please email me. Any popular press/news articles are meant to provide motivation or context for the academic papers listed, and to provide you with a sense of how empirical work is often interpreted by the media. Class discussions will center on the required academic papers. Readings marked *optional* are indeed optional, and reading them may provide further enrichment for students particularly interested in a certain topic. If you would like further resources on a given topic, please come to office hours or reach out.

Part I – Information Exposure

Session 1 (Thurs, Jan 25th): Introduction

Session 2 (Tues, Jan 30th): Personal health

Thornton, Rebecca L. 2008. "The Demand for, and Impact of, Learning HIV Status." *American Economic Review* 98 (5): 1829–63.

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Oster, Emily, Ira Shoulson, and E. Ray Dorsey. 2013. "Optimal Expectations and Limited Medical Testing: Evidence from Huntington Disease." *American Economic Review* 103 (2): 804–30.

Optional: Yaniv, Ilan, Deborah Benador, and Michal Sagi. 2004. "On Not Wanting to Know and Not Wanting to Inform Others: Choices Regarding Predictive Genetic Testing." *Risk, Decision and Policy* 9 (4): 317–36.

Optional: Caplin, Andrew, and Kfir Eliaz. 2003. "AIDS Policy and Psychology: A Mechanism-Design Approach." *RAND Journal of Economics* 34 (4): 631–46.

Optional (podcast): <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/02/01/1076372077/covid-testing-positive-employment>

Session 3 (Thurs, Feb 1st): Prosocial behavior

Andreoni, James, Justin M. Rao, and Hannah Trachtman. 2017. "Avoiding the Ask: A Field Experiment on Altruism, Empathy, and Charitable Giving." *Journal of Political Economy*

DellaVigna, S., List, J. A., & Malmendier, U. (2012). Testing for altruism and social pressure in charitable giving. *The quarterly journal of economics*, 127(1), 1-56.

Optional: Karlan, D., & List, J. A. (2007). Does price matter in charitable giving? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. *American Economic Review*, 97(5), 1774-1793.

Session 4 (Tues, Feb 6th): Prosocial behavior, cont.

Dana, Jason, Roberto A. Weber, and Jason Xi Kuang. 2007. "Exploiting Moral Wiggle Room: Experiments Demonstrating an Illusory Preference for Fairness." *Economic Theory* 33 (1): 67–80.

Dana, Jason, Daylian M. Cain, and Robyn M. Dawes. 2006. "What You Don't Know Won't Hurt Me: Costly (but Quiet) Exit in Dictator Games." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 100 (2): 193–201.

Optional: Schelling, T. C. (1958). The strategy of conflict. Prospectus for a reorientation of game theory. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2(3), 203-264.

Optional: Andreoni, J., & Bernheim, B. D. (2009). Social image and the 50–50 norm: A theoretical and experimental analysis of audience effects. *Econometrica*, 77(5), 1607-1636.

Session 5 (Thurs, Feb 8th): Political information: cognitive

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Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of communication*, 59(1), 19-39.

Dorison, C. A., Minson, J. A., & Rogers, T. (2019). Selective exposure partly relies on faulty affective forecasts. *Cognition*, 188, 98-107.

Optional: Hart, W., Albarracín, D., Eagly, A. H., Brechan, I., Lindberg, M. J., & Merrill, L. (2009). Feeling validated versus being correct: A meta-analysis of selective exposure to information. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(4), 555–588.

Session 6 (Tues, Feb 13th): Political information: social

Moore, M., Dorison, C. A., and Minson, J. A. (2023) “The bounded reputational benefits to selective exposure to partisan information.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*

Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2010). What drives media slant? Evidence from US daily newspapers. *Econometrica*, 78(1), 35-71.

Optional: Kahan, D. M. (2013). Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(4), 18.

Optional: Mullainathan, S., & Shleifer, A. (2005). The market for news. *American economic review*, 95(4), 1031-1053.

Session 7 (Thurs, Feb 15th): Information avoidance review

Golman, Russell, David Hagmann, and George Loewenstein. "Information avoidance." *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 1 (2017): 96-135.

Sharot, T., & Sunstein, C. R. (2020). How people decide what they want to know. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(1), 14-19.

Part II – Information Consumption and Updating

Session 8 (Feb 22nd): Negotiations updating

Babcock, Linda, George Loewenstein, Samuel Issacharoff, and Colin Camerer. 1995. “Biased Judgments of Fairness in Bargaining.” *American Economic Review* 85 (5): 1337–43.

Schwardmann, Peter, Egon Tripodi, and Joël J. van der Weele. 2022. "Self-Persuasion: Evidence from Field Experiments at International Debating Competitions." *American Economic Review*, 112 (4): 1118-46.

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Optional: Camerer, C. F. (1987). Do biases in probability judgment matter in markets? *Experimental Evidence*. *The American Economic Review*, 77(5), 981–997.

Optional: Charness, Gary, and Dan Levin. 2005. "When Optimal Choices Feel Wrong: A Laboratory Study of Bayesian Updating, Complexity, and Affect." *American Economic Review*, 95 (4): 1300-1309.

Optional: Camerer, Colin, George Loewenstein, and Martin Weber. 1989. "The Curse of Knowledge in Economic Settings: An Experimental Analysis." *Journal of Political Economy* 97 (5): 1232–54.

Session 9 (Feb 27th): Self updating

*Eil, David, and Justin M. Rao. "The good news-bad news effect: asymmetric processing of objective information about yourself." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 3.2 (2011): 114-38.

Zimmermann, Florian. 2020. "The Dynamics of Motivated Beliefs." *American Economic Review*, 110 (2): 337-61.

Optional: Enke, B., & Zimmermann, F. (2019). Correlation neglect in belief formation. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 86(1), 313-332.

Optional: Benabou, Roland, and Jean Tirole. 2002. "Self-Confidence and Personal Motivation." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 117 (3): 871–915.

Session 10 (Feb 29th): Political updating

Lord, C. G., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1979). Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 37(11), 2098.

Anup Gampa et al., *(Ideo)Logical Reasoning: Ideology Impairs Sound Reasoning*, 10 SOC. PSYCH. & PERSONALITY SCI. 1075, 1082 (2019).

Optional: Charles G. Lord et al., *Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence*, 37 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 2098, 2108 (1979); Nickerson, *supra* note 38, at 197.

Optional: Glaeser, Edward L., and Cass R. Sunstein. 2013. "Why Does Balanced News Produce Unbalanced Views?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 18975.

Part III: Intra vs interpersonal explanations

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Session 11 (Mar 5th): Self-signaling (intrapersonal, beliefs in the utility function)

Grossman, Z., & Van der Weele, J. J. (2017). Self-image and willful ignorance in social decisions. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 15(1), 173-217.

Falk, Armin, and Florian Zimmermann. 2016. "Beliefs and Utility: Experimental Evidence on Preferences for Information." CESifo Working Paper 6061.

Optional: Eliaz, Kfir, and Andrew Schotter. 2007. "Experimental Testing of Intrinsic Preferences for Noninstrumental Information." *American Economic Review* 97 (2): 166–69.

Optional: Eliaz, Kfir, and Ran Spiegler. 2006. "Can Anticipatory Feelings Explain Anomalous Choices of Information Sources?" *Games and Economic Behavior* 56 (1): 87–104

Optional: Grant, Simon, Atsushi Kajii, and Ben Polak. 1998. "Intrinsic Preference for Information." *Journal of Economic Theory* 83 (2): 233–59.

Session 12 (Mar 7th): Theory/process by which this can happen

Bénabou, R., & Tirole, J. (2016). Mindful economics: The production, consumption, and value of beliefs. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30(3), 141-164.

Optional: Bénabou, Roland, and Jean Tirole. "Identity, morals, and taboos: Beliefs as assets." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 2 (2011): 805-855.

Optional: Exley, Christine L. and Judd B. Kessler. "Information Avoidance and Image Concerns." *Revise & Resubmit, Economic Journal*

Optional: Akerlof, George A., and William T. Dickens. 1982. "The Economic Consequences of Cognitive Dissonance." *American Economic Review* 72 (3): 307–19.

Optional: Carrillo, Juan D., and Thomas Mariotti. 2000. "Strategic Ignorance as a Self-Disciplining Device." *Review of Economic Studies* 67 (3): 529–44.

Optional: Thaler, Michael, The Fake News Effect: Experimentally Identifying Motivated Reasoning Using Trust in News (July 22, 2021).

Session 13 (March 12th): Social-signaling (interpersonal, how you want to convince others)

Yoeli & Hoffman. *Hidden Games*. Evidence Games and Spin

Hippel, William von, and Robert Trivers. "The Evolution and Psychology of Self-Deception." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–16, doi:10.1017/s0140525x10001354

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Optional: Spence, M. (1973). Job Market Signaling. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>

Optional: Yoeli & Hoffman book chapter Motivated Reasoning

Session 14 (Mar 14th): Social signaling & strategic value of persuasion

*Moore, D. A., & Cain, D. M. (2007). Overconfidence and underconfidence: When and why people underestimate (and overestimate) the competition. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 103(2), 197-213.

Schwardmann, P., & Van der Weele, J. (2019). Deception and self-deception. *Nature human behaviour*, 3(10), 1055-1061.

Optional: Von Hippel, W., & Trivers, R. (2011). The evolution and psychology of self-deception. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 34(1), 1-16.

Session 15 (Mar 19th): Interpersonal vs Intrapersonal Explanations

Leary, M. R., Raimi, K. T., Jongman-Sereno, K. P., & Diebels, K. J. (2015). Distinguishing intrapsychic from interpersonal motives in psychological theory and research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(4), 497-517.

Jordan, J.J. (2023). A pull versus push framework for reputation. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 27(9), 66-82.

Session 16 (March 21st): What makes a good experiment?

SPRING BREAK

Part IV – Sharing of Information

Session 17 (April 2nd): Cheating

Fischbacher, U., & Föllmi-Heusi, F. (2013). Lies in disguise—an experimental study on cheating. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 11(3), 525-547.

Session 18 (April 4th): Personal information

Ewers, Mara, and Florian Zimmermann. "Image and misreporting." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 13, no. 2 (2015): 363-380.

Milgrom, Paul. 2008. "What the Seller Won't Tell You: Persuasion and Disclosure in Markets." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22 (2): 115-131.

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Optional: Akerlof, George A. 1970. "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84 (3): 488–500.

Session 19 (April 9th): Political information

Silver, I., Small, D. A., & Goodwin, G. (2021). Self-Censorship and the Strategic Omission of Facts from Communication. *Manuscript in Preparation*. Available starting at page 46 at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7291&context=edissertations>

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). The psychology of fake news. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 25(5), 388-402.

Optional: Galak, J., & Critcher, C. R. (2023). Who sees which political falsehoods as more acceptable and why: A new look at in-group loyalty and trustworthiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 124(3), 593–619.

Session 20 (April 11th): Political information

Ekstrom, Pierce D., and Calvin K. Lai. "The Selective Communication of Political Information." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 12, no. 5 (2021): 789-800.

Ren, Zhiying (Bella), Eugen Dimant and Maurice Schweitzer. "Social Motives for Sharing Conspiracy Theories" (September 8, 2021). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3919364>

Session 21 (April 16th): Summary

Session 22 (April 18th): Final Presentations

Session 23 (April 23rd): Final Presentations

Session 24 (April 25th): Final Presentations