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Mememes and the Spread of Misinformation: Establishing the Importance of Media Literacy in the Era of Information Disorder

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Mememes and the Spread of Misinformation: Establishing the Importance of Media Literacy in the Era of Information Disorder

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Overview

As the pandemic has pushed much of our daily interactions into online spaces, media literacy education is more vital than ever. We need to equip students with the skills and confidence to share information ethically and effectively in order for them to live fulfilling personal and professional lives online. This lesson plan brings together two parallel conversations within communication and media studies—media literacy and participatory culture—in order to explore the explosion of misinformation that is occurring in digital spaces and enable students to confidently navigate and participate in online conversations.

Lessons within this module take up the opportunities of being online with students to engage with real-life media examples that students are encountering every day. Lessons are focused in particular on memes and other forms of user-generated content as such content is (a) readily available and prominent on the platforms students use to find out news and information and (b) exist as underexplored sites in the spread of dis/misinformation. Memes and other user-generated content are the language used by the current generation of students in their daily communication. Incorporating it into teaching plans allows instructors to guide students to become more critical on multiple levels: First, in their daily communication use and circulation of information, and second, in their research and academic practices where they are constructing and circulating knowledge.

This teaching plan consists of three sessions with instructions for preparatory work for each. Session one introduces the core concepts of “participatory culture”, “user-generated content” and “memes”— this is done through a short introductory lecture on definitions and a class activity in which students go through their own social media platforms and identify the different ways in which they and their community participate on the platform. The aim of this session is to help students identify the characteristics of culture and technology that allow for user-generated content to exist and be this prevalent. After the first session, and as preparatory work for the rest of the module, students are asked to find examples of memes they encounter online that communicate civic or political information.

The second session explores the growing problem of mis- and dis-information and presents the term “information disorder” as a useful label for engaging with the multitude of bad content found online. Students work together to come up with a clear definition of mis- and dis-information and also present their political/civic meme example and discuss whether or not they think it spreads dis/misinformation. The aim of this session is to enable students to think

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critically about how user-generated content is implicated in the spread of information disorder and to lay the groundwork for exploring how it could also be weaponized to combat mis- and disinformation. As preparation for the final session, students are asked to remake a popular meme or other piece of user-generated content so that it serves a different political or civic purpose. Asking students to produce original work that draws upon the themes of the first two sessions is a way for them to critically reflect on their own media practices and feel empowered to engage in participatory culture positively and ethically. In the third session, students share their transformed meme and discuss as a group how these changes alter participation and information online in good or bad ways.

The design of this module is founded on the potentials of participatory culture and the desire to foster "a more participatory culture" (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013) both in the classroom and in new media communication.

Rationale

According to a report from Data & Society (2018) while media literacy has "become a center of gravity for countering 'fake news'" (2018, 3), traditional efforts have fallen short of equipping digital users with reflexive skills to properly counter the rising tide of so-called digital "information disorder" (Wardle 2019). Stakeholders concerned with media literacy education are therefore looking for new ways to approach media literacy that take into account the changing nature of mis/disinformation online and, importantly, properly conceive of students as both audiences and creators of digital content.

This lesson plan is thus an attempt to intervene in media literacy in a way that centers empowerment and properly conceives of students as agents of change in the fight against information disorder. Instead of seeing remote learning as a temporary inconvenience, we argue that it is an opportunity to meet students in the digital spaces that occupy, communicate and co-create within everyday. Building on the findings of Brooks and Ward (2007), we lean upon the multiple media technologies currently being utilized in remote learning to synthesize different pedagogical approaches and encourage active participation.

This module is centered around teaching students to think critically about information they encounter on social and digital media and how it is embedded in their everyday rituals, routines and self-identity. To achieve a sense of agency and empowerment we utilize theories and practices of participatory culture and put them in conversation with current understandings of information disorder and media literacy skills (Jenkins 2009). Lessons are designed around a synthesis of Bloom's (1956) general educational taxonomy and Hobbs (2017) pedagogical model of the five digital and media literacy skills in order to create a module that builds competency in both consuming and creating digital content in a socially responsible way. The module is centered on first remembering and understanding key concepts related to online participation and literacy; applying knowledge through critical engagement and analysis of actual digital content and finally using this critical knowledge to create and evaluate new content.

We utilize the affordances of video communications platforms and document sharing to build a class community that is accessible both synchronously and asynchronously. Moreover, we embrace students in their “digital form”—asking them to share examples from their real digital information encounters and equipping them with critical skills to feel empowered in their online participation. The classes and assigned preparatory work are designed to get students to apply theories of participatory culture and information disorder to their own digital experiences. We ask students to bring in examples they have encountered in the course of their own participation on digital platforms and reimagine it in light of the critical knowledge they acquire through the class. This project, in addition to the prompts and activities, are designed to equip students with the skills, and importantly the confidence, to harness the benefits of participatory culture and avoid the pitfalls of information disorder as both consumers and creators.

General Timeline

This module consists of three classes designed to take an hour and a half and 3 sets of preparatory work that should take students between an hour and an hour and a half. Classes can be taught over several days or over the course of several weeks. In the past this class has been most successfully taught as a three-week segment within classes that cover new media, social media and society, Internet culture, and classes that cover issues related to trust and journalism. For educators looking for incorporate memes and media literacy into other courses, this module offers several “live participation” elements (such as the participatory culture field observation in Session I and the misinformation definition activity in Session II) that could be easily transported into other lesson plans.

The module is centered around three live video-conferencing classes. However, each class also contains instructions for asynchronous learners who do not attend the live classes. To foster exchange and communication across the a/synchronous cohort we advise instructors to create a class Google Drive and/or Padlet and encourage students to use it to share their responses and resources with the class.

The organization of the timeline is reflected in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Timeline Organization

Section Title	Contents Description
Preparatory Work I	Assigned readings
Session I	Memes, User-Generated Content, and Participatory Culture
Preparatory Work II	Assigned readings/podcast + Find and share a meme

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Session II	Complicating Memes and UGC - How Are They Used to Spread Mis- and Disinformation?
Preparatory Work III	Assigned readings + Reimagine your meme
Session III	How Can We Strengthen Participatory Culture And Use It To Counter Information Disorder?

Detailed Lesson Plan

General comments for instructors

Each preparatory work section contains a list of readings or podcasts to listen to; choose as many as you wish to assign, or feel free to add in more current work.

Class size is imagined to be between 20-25; although these lesson plans could be adapted for smaller and larger classes sizes with some changes made to time assigned to feedback exercises. For very large classes (100+) feedback could be facilitated with teaching assistants running feedback groups of 25 (4-5 breakout groups in each).

Discussion questions and lecture prompts are non-exhaustive, you may want to ask different questions or elaborate on different topics depending on the collective interests of your class. Each session has preparatory work for students to complete prior to the live class sessions. If students do not attend live classes they can follow the instructions for asynchronous students included in the preparatory work section. We recommend instructors record parts of the zoom sessions where they are lecturing/outlining key concepts so that they can be shared with asynchronous learners. However this is left to the discretion of instructors.

A note about tools: We suggest google doc or padlet (www.padlet.com) to create a shared space for students to share documents and contribute asynchronously and synchronously. These open spaces have worked well in previous iterations of this class as they provide students with different routes to participation and engagement with the topic. These tools are available for free (even if with limited capacity) to instructors. Instructions are written with the affordances of Zoom in mind, but are easily adaptable to whichever communications platform your institution utilizes. We acknowledge that there are problematic dynamics in which many of these platforms are involved, and do encourage instructors to use other platforms they feel comfortable with. However, we also want this to be accessible under the current conditions we (students included) are all working in without over-burdening individuals with too many different required platforms and applications.

Session One: Memes, User-Generated Content, and Participatory Culture

This session will introduce students to core concepts: Participatory Culture, UGC, and memes, and be invited to think about them critically

Learning Objectives

- Define Participatory Culture, UGC, and Memes
- Identify the characteristics of participatory culture that make UGC prevalent.
- Share examples that demonstrate the different types of UGC
- Analyze the potential benefits and downside of participatory culture

Preparatory Work

- *Readings*
 - Hristova, Stefka. 2014. "Visual memes as neutralizers of political dissent." *Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12(1):265-276.
 - Jenkins, Henry. 2014. "A Meme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman." In *Confessions of an AcaFan*. Available at: <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html#sthash.L8OgmCSF.uxf5>
 - Jenkins, Henry, Ford, Sam, and Green, Joshua. 2018. "Introduction." In *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*, 1-46. New York: New York University Press.
 - Nissenbaum, Asaf, and Shifman, Limor. 2017. "Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board." *New Media & Society* 19(4): 483–501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815609313>
 - Östman, Johan. 2012. "Information, expression, participation: How involvement in user-generated content relates to democratic engagement among young people." *New media & society* 14(6):1004-1021.
 - Shifman, Limor. 2016. "Cross-Cultural Comparisons of User-Generated Content: An Analytical Framework." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5644–5663.
 - Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Introduction*. In *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press.
 - Usher, Nikki. 2010. "Why spreadable doesn't equal viral: A conversation with Henry Jenkins." In *NiemanLab*. Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2010/11/why-spreadable-doesnt-equal-viral-a-conversation-with-henry-jenkins/>
- *Preparation instructions for students joining asynchronously:*
 - Write a pre-reflection in which you define memes (a couple of sentences)
 - Choose an online platform (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, etc.) and write a paragraph describing what participation looks like on this platform? What actions count as participation? Is everyone participating in the same way? Are there different rewards for participation?

Class Structure

1. What is a meme?

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- a. Ask students to write their own definition of Internet memes on a Google doc/slide or Padlet wall (see suggested slide layout in the Teaching Materials section). A suggested prompt may be: "How would you describe what memes are to someone who has never used the Internet in their life or are not familiar with Internet culture?"
- b. Invite a few students to read aloud or explain what they wrote.
- c. Connect the definitions students wrote to the definition of memes by Limor Shifman (2014) in the upcoming step.
2. A short introductory lecture where the instructor presents key definitions of foundational concepts. This lecture should at least cover definitions of: Participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992), UGC (Östman, 2012), and memes (Shifman, 2014). The choice of additional terms or sources can be adaptable to your own class needs. You may also want to include examples or invite students to share examples.
3. In-class activity: "Participatory Culture Field Observation"
 - a. Divide students into groups of three to four, assign each group a specific platform (suggested options: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, Reddit) which they will observe for 10 minutes and discuss the following questions: What does participation look like on this platform? What actions can users take to participate? What are some of the formats of UGC circulating on this platform? Do users from different backgrounds participate in a different way? Who are the people you see participating on this platform? Are there different rewards for participation? Are there different hierarchies of users based on their level of participation? * note these questions are suggested and the instructor can select the ones they would like to use or phrase new ones based on their knowledge of their students.
 - b. After 10-15 minutes of small group discussions, each group representative shares back with the whole class. It is advised that the instructor takes notes on a shared google doc/virtual white board/slide to illustrate the themes that emerge.
4. Reflection and closing discussion (and setting up the next session). Ask students to share their thoughts on what came up from this activity in connection with the opening lecture and the potential impact of participatory culture. Suggested questions for facilitating the discussion:
 - a. What similarities and differences do you identify between the different platforms when it comes to participation?
 - b. What type of UGC was available on these platforms? Was it different between one platform and the other? What differences showed up?
 - c. Was there any type of UGC that you would categorize as hurtful or harmful in any way? What are some examples?
 - d. Participatory culture is potentially open for everyone, did you see in your field observation that everyone could participate everywhere equally?
 - e. Based on what we discussed today, what are the different types of voices that participatory culture can empower? What effect can empowering each of these voices have on our society?

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Session Two: Complicating Memes and UGC—How Are They Used to Spread Mis- And Disinformation?

This session will ask students to think critically about the darker sides of digital participatory culture and introduce them to the core concepts; misinformation, disinformation and information disorder.

Learning Objectives

- Identify the differences between mis- and dis-information and recognize the social and cultural impacts of information disorder
- Understand how user-generated content can be utilized to spread mis- and dis-information
- Discuss individual responsibilities related to generating and sharing online content
- Imagine ways in which user-generated content can aid in countering information disorder

Preparatory Work

- Readings / Podcasts to listen to:
 - Life Kit. April, 20th 2020. “Fake News Can Be Deadly. Here’s How to Spot It”. *NPR*. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/17/837202898/comic-fake-news-can-be-deadly-heres-how-to-spot-it>
 - Reply All #77. September 21st 2016. “The Grand Tapestry of Pepe”. *Gimlet Media*. Available at: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/n8ho8a>
 - Reply All #166. September 18th 2020. “Country of Liars”. *Gimlet Media*. Available at: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/llhe5nm>
 - Donovan, Joan. 2019. “How memes got weaponized: a short history”. *MIT Technology Review*. Available at <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/10/24/132228/political-war-memes-disinformation/>
 - Schreckinger, Ben. 2017. “World War Meme”. *Politico*. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856>
- Find a meme that conveys political or social information and share it on **padlet**. Write a paragraph explaining what the meme is communicating, be ready to share this in class if called on. *[In the instructions, include some recent cultural, political events as examples to look for memes about]*
- *Preparation instructions for students joining asynchronously:*
 - *Read/listen to the content assigned above and add your meme to the class padlet.*
 - *Read the Introduction of First Draft’s ‘Understanding Information Disorder’ - write your own accessible definitions of ‘misinformation, ‘disinformation’ and ‘information disorder.’*

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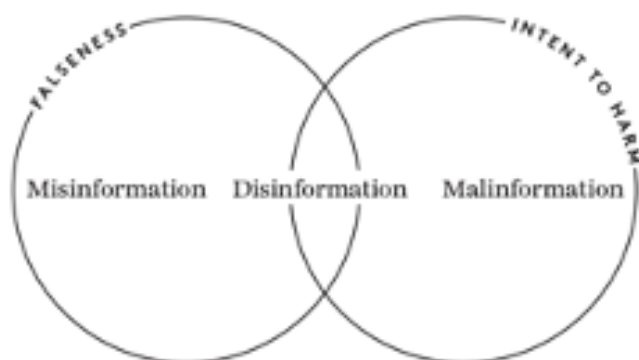
- *Look through the class padlet of shared memes; write notes reflecting on; (a) what quality of information you learn from the memes, how many appear to be spreading mis/disinformation and how do you know this?*
- *Write out a few recommendations you would give to a less digitally-literate friend who is considering using their social media platforms to share politically/civically minded content—how should they verify information? What should they share where? Are there things they should see as red flags when they are consuming content?*

Class Structure

1. Misinformation versus Disinformation

- First we explore the “darker side” of internet-mediated communication - introducing the idea of “misinformation” and “disinformation” using the definitions provided by First Draft’s essential guide (see Figure 1 below as an example). Things to discuss with students: What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “fake news?” Is “fake news” a useful term? Why is “intent to harm” an important thing to consider when classifying bad information? Why is it useful to separate out bad information into these categories? These questions and the resulting discussion aim to cement; (a) that “fake news” is an overly broad term that has become weaponized in partisan discussions (b) it is useful to have more precise terminology for different types of information as they are made with different desired impacts in mind and, importantly, require different kinds of interventions to mitigate their impacts, and (c) the precision of well-defined terms helps us to counter bad information in a non-partisan way.

Figure 1: First Draft’s Venn Diagram of Information Disorder



2. In class activity;

- a. Divide students into breakout rooms of 3-4 and ask them to collaboratively agree on their own definition of “misinformation”, “disinformation” and “information disorder.” Ask them to make the definition as accessible as possible so that a general

- audience would understand it. Ask them to write the agreed definitions on a shared Google Slide (see teaching materials for example layout)
- b. After 10-15 minutes (or whenever groups have finished their definitions) - bring back students to the main room, read aloud each definition in each box and after every box ask students to vote via the poll/chat feature which definition feels the clearest to them. Highlight the chosen definitions.
3. Explore how memes and user-generated content can be used to spread misinformation online. Talk about “spreadability” of content on social media and the ease of sharing, and how this can result in further information disorder.
 - a. Ask 4-5 people to share the meme/content they chose in their prep-work and ask them to explain the meme using the description they wrote during prep-work. After each student shares, ask critical questions about how they think the meme spread (across a single or multiple platforms, within a particular audience only), how accurate or factual they believe the information conveyed by the meme is, the impact they think it may have had. Ask students to ask questions or share feedback about the meme in question - either using the chat feature or verbally. Summarized the sharing session by drawing together any similarities shared across the examples, any stark consequences, and conclusions about the potential for memes to spread disinformation.
 - b. Set up the next preparatory work to be done outside of class; Tell students that they will be asked to reimagine their chosen meme to strengthen its informational value; this may mean re-imagining it for a different platform with different affordances, it might be creating a meme that debunks it entirely, it may just be adding a few features to contextualize the information the meme shares. Students should think critically about how to retain the positive aspects of it, and centrally retain its memetic value.
 4. In class activity;
 - a. Reflect on how we’ve identified ways in which memes and UGC can be a powerful participatory tool for political and social culture but also how it can also be weaponized to spread bad information.
 - b. Divide students into breakout groups of 3-4 and pose the following scenario. “The world has decided to have a “social media reset” - all social media is to be archived and the platforms are going to be wiped of content. It is our job to create a new set of guidelines for (a) users and (b) creators on social media to make social media grow into a creative, productive space for all users. In your groups, come up with a top 5 list of guidelines for creators, and a top 5 list of guidelines for sharing.” Encourage students to think about big and small ways in which social media content/platforms/usage could be changed for the better. Give a few examples to stimulate sharing - should creators put their @handles in their content itself to make sure they have credit and take responsibility? Should users be alerted to when content was created to make sure they are sharing up-to-date information? Ask students to write their lists on shared google slides.

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5. Reflection and closing discussion - Pick up on repeated themes, ask students to justify certain choices and highlight advice that could be easily implemented by users and creators using platforms right now. Repeat instructions for the next preparatory work reimagining their memes.

Session Three: How Can We Strengthen Participatory Culture And Use It To Counter Information Disorder?

A session for students to share the examples they recreated and imagine the ways in which they can create a healthier information culture around them.

Learning Objectives

- Produce original work that draws upon the themes of the first two sessions
- Reflect on personal sharing behaviors and how they spread information
- Feel empowered to engage in participatory culture positively and ethically

Preparatory Work

- Reading
 - Milner, Ryan M. 2013. "Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement." *International Journal of Communication* 7: 34.
 - Decker, Benjamin. 2019. What a Kamala Harris Meme Can Teach Us About Fighting Fake News in 2020. *Politico Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/03/what-a-kamala-harris-meme-can-teach-us-about-fighting-fake-news-in-2020-225515>
- Instructions for students:
 - *Recreate the example you brought to the last class session, and write a short rationale using the concepts/readings that explains the changes you made (300-500 words)*
 - *Share your example on a Padlet Wall (Padlet.com) or in a shared google doc/slides. You will paste the original example and your recreated example along with your text. This will result in a gallery of recreated examples.*
 - *Come prepared to discuss what you did!*
 - *Students who are joining asynchronously are also asked to share their example in the shared place with the rest of the class.*

Class Structure

1. If the number of students and the length of the class session allow, invite each student to give a brief overview of their recreated example. For larger classes, this may be better facilitated by dividing the class into smaller groups with discussions facilitated by TAs.

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2. Ideally, individual reflections will take up about half to two thirds of the class sessions, and will be followed by a reflections discussion that draws together the concepts and problems discussed in the previous two sessions. If you find that you have a long time for the reflection discussion, you can begin by asking students to reflect on a few questions in small groups before discussing with the full class. In particular, the suggested scenarios listed below work well for small group discussions.
3. *Suggested Questions for Reflection Discussion:*
 - a. Comparing our two galleries of the original examples and the remade examples— what are the two different worlds that they create? In other words, how would a world with only our original examples be different from a world with only our new (recreated) examples? Use your imagination to describe what you think that world would look like.
 - b. How has this module/unit changed your own opinions? Do you think you will think differently before sharing things online? Do you feel well-equipped to make your own memes/content? In what situations or on what topics would you like to create content?
 - c. What would you do after having this class if you were in a situation where you encountered the spread of misinformation? Suggested scenarios for discussion:
 - Your uncle forwarded fake news to the family chat group.
 - A neighbor shared some fake news on the neighborhood Facebook Group or Nextdoor - do you comment on it? If so, how? If not, is there something else you would do?
 - A classmate shares a meme to a class group that you find offensive.
 - You see an outrageously false news story on twitter, do you retweet? Why?
 - You see a news article that contains some false information. How do you alert people?
 - You want to educate your classmates on how to vote in the upcoming student elections, how do you use social media to do this?

Teaching materials

Online platforms to use:

- Video conferencing platform - e.g. Zoom or your institution's preferred platform
- Shared Google Drive - used to share Google Slides, resources and allow for asynchronous learners to upload reflections and read their peers
- Padlet.com free account

Session One: Memes, User-Generated Content, and Participatory Culture

Assigned readings:

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- Hristova, Stefka. 2014. "Visual memes as neutralizers of political dissent." *Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12(1):265-276.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2014. "A Meme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman." In *Confessions of an AcaFan*. Available at: <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html#sthash.L8OgmCSF.uxfs>
- Jenkins, Henry, Ford, Sam, and Green, Joshua. 2018. "Introduction." In *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*, 1-46. New York: New York University Press.
- Nissenbaum, Asaf, and Shifman, Limor. 2017. "Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board." *New Media & Society* 19(4): 483–501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815609313>
- Östman, Johan. 2012. "Information, expression, participation: How involvement in user-generated content relates to democratic engagement among young people." *New media & society* 14(6):1004-1021.
- Shifman, Limor. 2016. "Cross-Cultural Comparisons of User-Generated Content: An Analytical Framework." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5644–5663.
- Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Introduction*. In *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press.
- Usher, Nikki. 2010. "Why spreadable doesn't equal viral: A conversation with Henry Jenkins." In *NiemanLab*. Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2010/11/why-spreadable-doesnt-equal-viral-a-conversation-with-henry-jenkins/>

Example of a shared google slide for definitions



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Session Two: Complicating Memes and UGC—How Are They Used to Spread Mis- And Disinformation?

Assigned readings:

- Life Kit. April, 20th 2020. “Fake News Can Be Deadly. Here’s How to Spot It”. *NPR*. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/17/837202898/comic-fake-news-can-be-deadly-heres-how-to-spot-it>
- Reply All #77. September 21st 2016. “The Grand Tapestry of Pepe”. *Gimlet Media*. Available at: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/n8ho8a>
- Reply All #166. September 18th 2020. “Country of Liars”. *Gimlet Media*. Available at: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/llhe5nm>
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Example of how to organize a shared google slide for definitions

“Misinformation”	“Disinformation”	“Information Disorder”
(1)	(1)	(1)
(2)	(2)	(2)
(3)	(3)	(3)
(4)	(4)	(4)
(5)	(5)	(5)

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Session Three: How Can We Strengthen Participatory Culture And Use It To Counter Information Disorder?

Assigned readings:

- Milner, Ryan M. 2013. "Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement." *International Journal of Communication* 7: 34.
- Decker, Benjamin. 2019. What a Kamala Harris Meme Can Teach Us About Fighting Fake News in 2020. *Politico Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/03/what-a-kamala-harris-meme-can-teach-us-about-fighting-fake-news-in-2020-225515>

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Rachel E. Moran is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for an Informed Public based at the University of Washington's Information School. She holds a PhD from the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Her research focuses on the role of trust in information environments and the spread of mis- and disinformation.

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