Preamble to the assignment:

This is the third major (summative) assessment in a thematic first year composition course. The course focuses on genres of "fake news," with four units taking on satire/parody, hoax, mainstream media, and conspiracy, respectively. Ultimately, the course takes media literacy as seriously as it takes information literacy, asking students not merely to develop their acuity at differentiating trustworthy from problematic information, but also troubling this distinction by examining how media platforms and technologies shape our perceptions of truth and falsehood.

Rounding out the third unit, this assignment asks students to consider where, how, and why "facts" shift and bias emerges as a single news story "mutates" across wildly different media platforms. By encouraging students to focus as much on the different affordances of the media platforms where their chosen news story appears as on the content of that story, it helps them think critically about how "the medium really is the message" (Klein). By prompting students to develop a claim about how the story "mutates" (Best) as it moves from one media outlet to another, it further invites them to reflect on "forwarding" (Harris) as an academic *and* a social process. Finally, by challenging them to present their research in the form of a webpage, this assignment provides them with an opportunity to invent with some of the same media affordances and constraints they analyze.

Primary texts for this unit:

Best, Joel. "Mutant Statistics." Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists. University of California Press, 2001.

Harris, Joseph. "Forwarding." Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts. Utah State University Press, 2006.

Klein, Ezra. "I Didn't Want It to Be True, but the Medium Really Is the Message." The New York Times, The New York Times, 7 Aug. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/opinion/media-message-twitter-instagram.html.

Reflections on the assignment:

My favorite part of this assignment is how it marries form and content, medium and message. It does this by drawing students' attentions to the radical differences in a single news story when it travels from one media outlet or platform to another. Because students have the ability to choose stories that interest them (with instructor vetting, of course!), they can more readily see how specific media technologies shape the contours of the topics they care about. Having students submit a webtext with their research and analysis is also quite fun. Many students appreciate the opportunity to compose using a different media, and organizing their ideas around the logics of a webpage encourages them to experience firsthand how those differences shape their sensibilities as well.

This assignment can be challenging, however, when it comes to defining a "single news story" for students. Not incorrectly, many think of an ongoing event as "a story" rather than conceiving of a single article, tweet, video, or soundbite and its travel or hypermediation across several platforms as "a story" for analysis. This isn't, in other words, about coverage of a single event by different media outlets. Instead, we try to focus on how, for example, a single headline in the NYT might get picked up by a late night show, which is then, in turn, tweeted with commentary by a celebrity or pundit. The point here is to provide a fairly limited text (i.e. the original article by the NYT and the commentary it catalyzes as it moves across platforms) for analysis. This way, students' observations can focus as much or more on how the story shifts from one media outlet to another as they do on the content of the story itself.

One of the ways to scaffold for this possible challenge is to ask students to focus on the difference hearing (e.g. radio or podcast) vs. reading (e.g. newspaper or newsfeed) vs. seeing (e.g. T.V. or YouTube) the story makes. Asking them to close their eyes while listening or to plug their ears while watching can help them make sharper observations about specific media affordances. In a similar vein, students can also benefit from experimenting with a multimedia version of the classic "telephone game" by translating a whisper into a drawing into gestures into written words and so forth. I have uploaded an example of this activity with more in-depth context and directions to the DRC Course Activities Collection.

SCOOP 3: Mainstream Media Mutations

Description:	Interlinking "website" with 6 pages (appx. 250-300 words per page = 1500-1800 words total), plus "Contribution" page with cited sources and project manager name(s) and role(s)
Sources:	At least 4 cited sources:

- Klein's "The Medium Really is the Message" and/or Best's "Mutant Statistics"
- Possibly Ceccarelli, Hutcheon, Fredal, or Lethem (if you don't choose both Klein and Best) [*NB: These are the authors of course readings from earlier units*]
- At least two outside sources (whether you choose to use scholarly or non-scholarly sources, your choices must be justified through the use of attributive tags)

Total Points:	**100**
Due Date(s):	Inquiry question and news story/stories due Sun., 3/26; Draft site/stage analyses due Sun., 4/2; Draft webpage due W 4/5; **Final webpage due Sunday, 4/9**

The Assignment

In this Summative Composition Or Online Project (SCOOP), you will develop a website (using, e.g., Wix.com), Adobe Express page, or hyperlinked PowerPoint in which you trace 4 stages (3 transitions) in the spread, mutation, and evolution of a news story. (E.g., a Washington Post scoop that later gets picked up by The Daily Beast which is in turn re-tweeted by a celebrity and then forwarded to you by your great-aunt Barb has 4 stages and 3 transitions.) Using Harris as a foundation for understanding how and why "Forwarding" occurs, you will research and develop an argument about how this story changes over time and why those changes matter. For each "stage" (i.e. for each media representation in a chain of forwarding), your argument should show careful attention to the different audiences and interfaces of these media. At the same time, you will "forward" your own argument based on at least two of our course readings (one of which must be Klein's "The Medium Really is the Message" or Best's "Mutant Statistics;" the other can be any of our primary course readings, including Ceccarelli, Hutcheon, Fredal, and Lethem) and two outside sources.

Strategies

- Start by asking a question or questions you and your partners find compelling and which will require outside research to answer. These questions can be about specific content you find interesting (e.g. news about climate change, fast fashion, crypto, politics, arts and entertainment, etc.), but must also take into consideration how media representations of these issues shapes our perception of them. We will work on developing these questions together in class, but at a minimum, your question should 1) engage your interests, 2) be open-ended (i.e. your "answer" should be an argument instead of a "yes," a "no," or a fact [like a date or location]), and 3) involve some aspect of media, information, or technology analysis. For instance, asking "is fast fashion ethically problematic in terms of labor and the environment" might be interesting to you, but is not open-ended. Asking

"how does the fast fashion industry take advantage of and perpetuate global inequality" may be interesting and open-ended, but does not involve media analysis. Asking "how do media companies address their participation in the fast fashion industry (through promotion and ad revenues) when reporting on disposable clothing as an ethical and environmental problem" would address all three criteria.

- Choose a mainstream news story that you and your partners find sufficiently interesting for a sustained analysis. It is important to note, though, that the news story must also be traceable across at least 4 stages. In other words, not only should the topic be interesting to you, but you must also be able to identify a chain of reporting for a particular story. For instance, let's say you saw someone share Stephen Colbert's "Slay Your Fleek" on Facebook. You could trace this to the Colbert segment itself (sorta – you could find it on YouTube, but of course that is also a social media platform. You could try CBS.com, but wouldn't be able to find a story more than a couple of months back, unless you have a subscription. And doesn't this speak to the disposability of our media, not unlike fast fashion?), which in turn references a story from Pavement Pieces, based on TikTok trends. Here you would be jumping from Facebook (where you encountered it) to CBS (mainstream media host site) to Pavement Pieces (original story) to TikTok (source for emerging trends) to analyze how this story changes over time and media.
- Use the methods we've discussed together in class (i.e. compiling a list of the details you find most interesting, strange and compelling and ranking them in order of importance; creating a list of repetitions, strands/patterns, or binaries and answering questions about how and why they're operating in the text) to examine your news story within the context of each platform. You should have separate, if interrelated, sets of details for each stage in this transformation. Your goal is to generate 4 lists (one per stage) with *more* details than you need and to select those that you think speak best to the claim you are making.
  [*NB: This portion of the assignment can be scaffolded with the activity included below*]
- Speaking of your claim, you should think about how this story participates in what Harris calls "forwarding" as it is reappropriated by different media sources at each stage in this chain of reporting. Though you do not need to use Harris as a source, you should apply either Klein or Best (or both) in order to make a claim about how these transformations operate and why that matters. Remember, you too are forwarding an argument, not just about this story but about how and why the story transforms/evolves/mutates over time and platforms.
- Once you have a working claim (your claim can and should still evolve!!), go back to each individual platform/ media site and write a draft about how that story evolves at that particular stage making use of some of the details you noted a couple of steps above. Each stage should have at least 200 words of draft analysis arguing how this story is transformed by the media platform/context in which it is reported.
- Think about the evolving thesis model we discuss in class as a helpful way of generating a "path" for moving forward through your news story. In other words, you can and should look for the obstacles in your path – the conflicting or complicating evidence – that suggest you may need to modify your thesis about how this story transforms. Again, return to the list of evidence you generated at each stage and ask whether it supports/ confirms your thesis or if it might push against your analysis. Actively seek out the evidence that complicates your analysis and claims in order to provide the most robust path forward through this series of news stories.
- Besides complicating your ideas with evidence from each site/stage in this news story, you should also complicate it through the use of outside research. Part of this assignment will ask you to incorporate outside sources that not only confirm (what Harris calls "Authorizing") your argument, but "extend" it (to use Harris's language). That is, you will want to find sources that address your topic and inquiry question (see the first bullet point above) rather than directly addressing this particular news story. Doing this will help you see the story and what it means as well as how it transforms from new perspectives that should complicate your own.
- Identify a web-building site or similar platform that will allow you to demonstrate your argument about media mutations by creatively incorporating some of those mutations into the structure of your argument. You might, for instance, use Adobe Express if you want to show a clear evolution from one story to the next in which each transformation across platforms also marks a transformation in the meaning of the story. Alternatively, you might consider a website that functions as a mini-web (i.e. each page links to all of the others) if you want to demonstrate a story that doesn't transform in a linear way, but looks different depending on which path you take through it.
- **On Tuesday, 4/4**, **we will explore Adobe Express as a class**. This is a web-based platform that is free for everyone and is designed to help create aesthetically pleasing webpages. We will talk about basics, but this is absolutely an intuitive platform and the easiest way to become proficient in it is to play with it! Remember, you can use other

platforms, including PowerPoint (which allows you to hyperlink to other pages in the presentation so that you don't just have to move straight through start to finish), but the point here is to think about the difference your platform will make in the presentation of your research, argument, and analysis.

● Upload a link to a website, Adobe Express page, or PowerPoint that responds to the assignment prompt above while also incorporating elements of intentional web design. Your final product should demonstrate an awareness of websites as a medium that allow its audiences to move through information in particular ways. Some of these may be demonstrated through links and embedded media, but others might simply reflect your understanding of how images, text, comment boxes, and other forms of interaction function in web-based media.
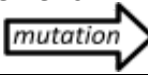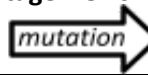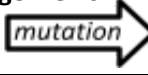
Criteria for Evaluation

1. Does the SCOOP "forward" its own argument through careful analysis of the ways a news story mutates across different media? Does it articulate WHY that mutation is significant in relation to the chosen topic or news content? Does the argument itself mutate or evolve in response to complicating evidence?

2. Does the SCOOP make a claim about HOW this news story mutates across platforms? Does it identify how course texts and outside research challenge us to think not only about what a story means, but also how that meaning is conveyed through a variety of different media platforms?

3. Does the SCOOP use details from the news stories and their platforms as well as specific words or phrases from course texts and outside research to complicate and "extend" its argument about WHAT this news story means? Does it identify patterns of details within specific sites/stages as well as across media platforms to show how the story mutates or transforms?

4. Does the SCOOP exhibit clarity and coherence? Does it make use of a variety of website modalities (e.g. text and image, hyperlink and video, and/or site structure and user interface) to demonstrate rhetorical awareness of how these conventions direct audiences' attentions? Does it have a linked "contributions" page with appropriately cited sources and project manager name(s) and role(s)?

Scaffolding Activity to Prepare for Analysis:

The graphic organizer below is intended as an intermediate step between students' initial submission of an inquiry question and news story (for vetting/approval) and their submission of draft site/stage analyses. Though the components are relatively intuitive, students sometimes struggle to understand the difference between mutations and evolutions. They need not get hung up on the difference. But if it becomes a hindrance, I explain that their goal is to make an argument about why and how a news story changes over time and media (mutation) while allowing their own argument to grow in complexity and precision as they incorporate conflicting and/or complicating evidence (evolution).

	First Stage News Story → *mutation*	Second Stage News Story → *mutation*	Third Stage News Story → *mutation*	Fourth Stage News Story (for pairs)
Notice: Write down at least 10 specific details you notice in this story. Could be what it says, but might also be about images, links, hashtags, social media buttons, etc. ↓ *evolution*				
Focus: Pick at least 3 details from your list that suggest an interesting and important pattern. Name that pattern here. ↓ *evolution*				
Analyze: How is that pattern operating? Why do you think it matters? Who do you think it matters for? This is just a micro-thesis about this story. ↓ *evolution*				
*** Complicate: Look for details that disprove, trouble, or complicate your pattern. These can be from the story itself or from research. Name them and explain how they complicate your micro-thesis. ↓ *evolution*				

Evolve: Identify a new pattern that accounts not only for the original details, but also for complicating details. Link this stage of the story to other stages.				