SMNR: Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era

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Semester: Spring 2024
Lectures: M 5:55 - 7:45pm TNH 3.124
Office Hours: After class and by appt.

Course Numbers: LAW 397S
                  INF 385T
                  PA 388K

Course Aims

The purpose of this course is to expose students to the evolution of information warfare, from the 1700s to current day. The course will examine propaganda and disinformation campaigns, the psychology behind how they work and how they became central to both the Cold War and political elections. The course will then look at the advent of social media and algorithmic optimization to facilitate and accelerate the reach and impact. Students will explore the impact on both United States and global events such as Brexit and the French Presidential Elections. Finally, students will discuss where this will lead in the coming years and explore potential policy solutions across intelligence tools and strengthening critical thinking, as well as the legal implications including privacy laws, internet regulations and national security implications.

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Understand the complexity of the current global landscape as it relates to propaganda, deception and misinformation;
2. Trace the history of disinformation from pre-1800s to current day, across multiple geographies and the arc of technology;
3. Recognize the psychological reasons disinformation and misinformation are persuasive and the difficulties in reversing any cognitive messaging;
4. Identify how recent technologies have and continue to alter the speed and range of the flow of disinformation;
5. Debate current legal and technological challenges which may address the flow of disinformation; and
6. Develop policy solutions that address the multi-faceted nature of disinformation and its impact on American democracy.

Academic Accommodations and Academic Integrity

Upon request, the University of Texas at Austin provides appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact

the Office of the Dean of Students at 512-471-6259 or 512-410-6644 (video phone) or http://ddce.utexas.edu/disability/how-to-register-with-ssd/.

Academic integrity is central to the mission of the university. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently, except when assignments specifically authorize collaborative effort. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person without proper acknowledgement of that source. This means that you must use footnotes and quotation marks to indicate the source of any phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or ideas found in published volumes, on the Internet, or created by another student. For more information about the university's expectation for academic integrity, please see: https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/academicintegrity.php

For clarity, the use of an AI Chatbot in this course is prohibited. An "AI Chatbot" means a software program that uses artificial intelligence and/or natural language processing to generate an answer posed by a user. AI Chatbots include, but are not limited to, ChatGPT, any GPT version, including 3.5 and 4, Google's Bard, and Microsoft BingGPT.

Course Format

The normal format of the class will begin with a lecture on the required reading materials found in the Course Outline below. The second half of the class will consist of one or more invited guest speakers who will address the students. Guests will be encouraged to provide ample opportunity for questions during their presentations. The individuals invited to class will include a mix of academics, industry, public policy, government and legal experts.

This course complies with the law school's Credit Hour Policy and will require at least 42.5 hours of total work per credit.

Attendance

A significant portion of the content of the material delivered in class will come from the guest speakers and in-class discussion. Therefore, it is critical that every student who enrolls in the class commits to attend all of the classes. Out of respect to your fellow classmates and our guest speakers, it is expected that all students will arrive on time for class and not leave until the class is formally dismissed. Any student who needs to miss a class session should notify Professor Jones in advance.

Grades

Class grades will be based on both a seminar paper, an in-class defense of the paper, and attendance/participation in class.

The seminar paper will make up 50% of each student's grade. The paper will present an important topic impacted by disinformation, documenting the techniques, highlighting the impact, and presenting potential solutions, addressing any technological, societal and legal hurdles to the implementation of said solutions. **The final version should be thirty to fifty double-spaced typewritten pages, including footnotes, in the aggregate. Images should not be part of the paper, but rather included after the footnotes and referenced in the paper.**

The 50% of the seminar paper will consist of the following:
- Outline (5%): Due **February 19[h]**. A 2 page outline on the student's proposed topic.
- First Draft (5%): Due **March 25th**. A draft of the paper at least 15 pages long.
- Final Draft (35%): **FINAL SEMINAR PAPERS ARE DUE BY SUNDAY, APRIL 21st at 11:59 P.M. CST. PAPERS THAT ARE LATE WILL HAVE ½ LETTER GRADE SUBTRACTED PER 24 HOURS LATE.**
- Final Presentation (5%): A 5 minute verbal presentation of key points of your seminar paper. **April 22nd.**

Responses to specific, written questions from Professor Jones are due before each class (submitted via Canvas) will make up 25% of the overall class grade.

Class attendance and participation will constitute 25% of each student's grade. An A grade for participation will be earned with prepared participation in class discussion and no unexcused/unexplained absences. Students must read all the material before each class and be prepared to discuss the materials in class. Each unexcused absence will result in a ½ letter grade subtraction (5% each).

Grades will be assigned along a regular letter grade scale. Your paper and presentation will be graded on your ability to present your proposed solution and justification in a well articulated, researched and communicated manner. The lack of grammatical and technical errors will be included as part of the grading rubric. Additionally, the originality and intellectual ambition of the proposed solution will also be part of the grading rubric.

Cell Phones

I ask that you silence cell phones and other noisy things during class. Repeated disturbances from these devices will negatively impact your class participation grade.

Texas Senate Bill 212

Beginning January 1, 2020, Texas Senate Bill 212 requires all employees of Texas universities, including faculty, report any information to the Title IX Office regarding sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking that is disclosed to them. Texas law requires that all employees who witness or receive any information of this type (including, but not limited to, writing assignments, class discussions, or one-on-one conversations) must be reported. If you would like to speak with someone who can provide support or remedies without making an official report to the university, please email advocate@austin.utexas.edu. For more information about reporting options and resources, visit http://www.titleix.utexas.edu/, contact the Title IX Office via email at titleix@austin.utexas.edu, or call 512-471-0419.

Course Outline

CLASS 1: JAN 22: Intro - How Disinformation and Propaganda Became A National Security Threat
   Agenda:

- Class introduction:
  o Expectations and responsibilities
  o Guest Speakers
  o Student Paper and Presentation
- Intro to Current Day Manipulation of Audiences
- How did We Get Here?
- Legal Implications
- What does the next 10 years look like?

   Required Reading:

- Chapter 1 of Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era (document to be provided in Canvas)
- America's Favorite Flimsy Pretext for Limiting Free Speech

CLASS 2: JAN 29: The Psychology And History Of Disinformation
   Agenda:

- Propaganda/Disinformation/Fake News
  o What is it?
  o History versus the Marketplace of Ideas
- The Psychology of Disinformation
  o Why Disinformation?
  o Who Uses Disinformation?
  o Why Does Disinformation Work?
  o Ongoing impact of Disinformation

   Required Reading:

- Chapters 2 and 3 of Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era (document to be provided in Canvas)

   Expected Guest Speaker – Professor Bethany Albertson

CLASS 3: FEB 5: The Beginnings Of Mass Media and Propaganda - Radio, TV and Advertising
   Agenda:

- Media as Warfare
- Splitting of the truth
- The Business of Propaganda
- Entertainment as Propaganda

   Required Reading: Chapter 7 of Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era (document to be provided in Canvas)

Expected Guest Speaker – Professor Kiril Avramov

CLASS 4: FEB 12: Optimizing Propaganda As Warfare
    Agenda:

- Evolution of Propaganda and Technology and Foreign Interference
- How WWI Changed Propaganda
- How WWII Changed Propaganda
- Propaganda and the Early Cold War
- Impact:
  - What changed?
  - How was it used?
  - Who was using it?

    Required Reading:

- Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era (document to be provided in Canvas)

    Expected Guest Speaker – **John Sipher**

CLASS 5: FEB 19: Weapons of Math Destruction and Algorithmic Echo Chambers
    Agenda:

- Platform Monetization
- Algorithms
- Advertising and Reach
- Free Will or Singularity

    Required Reading:

- Class 5 Reading Packet
- Echo Chambers
- Video: "Manipulating the YouTube Algorithm" (18 minutes)
- Echo chambers, rabbit holes, and ideological bias: How YouTube recommends content to real users

    Expected Guest Speaker – **Sam Wooley**

    Assignment Due: Paper Outline

CLASS 6: FEB 26: Coming Of Age: Section 230, the Internet, Digital Advertising, and Targeted Media
    Agenda:

- History of the Internet and Disinformation
- Ad Technology

Required Reading:
- Chapter 8 of Propaganda, Deception & Manipulation in the Technology Era (document to be provided in Canvas)
- *Zeran v. America Online, Inc.,*
- Force v. Facebook, Inc., No. 18-397
- Brief Of The Onion As Amicus Curiae

Expected Guest Speaker – Mike Masnick

CLASS 7: MARCH 4: Content Moderation & The Balance of Business
Agenda:
- The Business Model of Fake News
- Distinguishing Types of Disinformation
- Dissecting Truth from Fiction
- Fake News Online

Required Reading:
- Class 7 Reading Packet
- Moderator Mayhem

Expected Guest Speaker – **Katie Harbath**

MARCH 11 – Spring Break: No Class

CLASS 8: MARCH 18: Disinformation, Propaganda, and United States Politics
Agenda:
- US Elections and Propaganda in Internet Era
- What Future Elections May Look Like
- Recent US Presidential Elections
- Memetic Warfare
- Hacker, Bots and Hoaxes
- Cyber Propaganda

Required Reading:
- Class 8 Reading Packet
- Video: The Power of Big Data and Psychographics." (11 minutes)
- Video: **How online hoaxes and fake news played a role in the election** (7 minutes)
- Video: Microtargeting political ads are the problem (5 min)
- Legal Cases:
  - Federal Election Commission *V*. Wisconsin Right To Life, Inc.
  - Susan B. Anthony List V. Driehaus
  - Citizens United V. Federal Election Commission

Expected Guest Speaker – **Jeremy Smith** and **Michael Shannon**

CLASS 9: MARCH 25: Common Law, Litigation, and Accountability
    Agenda:
- State and Federal Legislation
- Common Law Answer to Disinformation
- Litigation and Accountability

    Required Reading:
- Class 9 Reading Packet
- **https://trustandsafety.fun/**

    Expected Guest Speaker – **Justin Nelson**

    Assignment Due: First Draft of Paper (see Canvas for more details)

CLASS 10: APRIL 1: Disinformation, Propaganda, and Global Implications
    Agenda:
- Global Events
  - Brexit
  - French Elections
  - Syria
  - The Lisa Case
  - China
- Consequences on Democracy

    Required Reading:
- Class 10 Reading Packet

    Expected Guest Speaker – Graham Brookie

CLASS 11: APRIL 8: Dark Arts & The Future Is Here
    Agenda:
- Terrorism
  - ISIS
  - Radicalization
  - GIFCT
  - Accountability?
- Nation-State Hacking
- Normalization of Information Warfare
- Domestic Terrorism

    Required Reading:
- Class 11 Reading Packet
- Gonzalez v. Google
- Twitter Inc. v. Taamneh

Expected Guest Speaker – TBD

CLASS 12: APRIL 10: Re(Evolution) Of The Internet: Utopian Dreams Or Dystopian Conduit
Agenda:
- Another age of propaganda?
- How to counter propaganda
- Platform Self Regulation or Liability
- Proposed Legislation
- Global Initiatives
- Deep Fakes

Required Reading:
- Class 12 Reading Packet

Expected Guest Speakers – **Matthew Ferraro, Ambassador Karen Kornbluh, Raquel Vazquez Llorente** (to be confirmed)

SEMINAR PAPERS ARE DUE BY SUNDAY, APRIL 21st at 11:59 P.M. CST.

CLASS 13: APRIL 22nd: Final Topic Presentations

CLASS 14: APRIL 29th: Class Review & Careers in Disinformation & Propaganda
Agenda:
- What did we learn?
- Legal Implications & Challenges
- What do the next 10 years look like?

Required Reading:
- Class 14 Reading Packet

Expected Guest Speakers – Jaime Cabrera, Maggie Engler, Jehmu Greene (to be confirmed)