I. Course Description

Many people strongly hold beliefs about science, health, or politics that are unsupported or completely false. This course explores the psychological and social factors that make people vulnerable to deceptive communication, misinformation, and conspiracy theories and the role of media, especially social media, in spreading misinformation to wider audiences. False beliefs can have widespread consequences when acted upon, as in the case of parents who refuse to immunize their children against harmful diseases. The readings survey the landscape of disinformation and propaganda, assessing their strategic aims and why such campaigns exist. Readings in the psychology of information processing also address why it is difficult to correct misinformed beliefs. Among other concepts and theories, the course will cover cognitive bias, social conformity, identity protection, motivated reasoning, and cultural cognition. Since the affordances and business models of social media seem to make these platforms susceptible to misuse by propagandists, some time is also spent analyzing the structure and networked architecture of the most popular apps and platforms. The course therefore addresses the what of misinformation, how it comes to circulate in society, and why it continues to have influence even though we supposedly know about propaganda.

II. Expected Outcomes

- Develop a conceptual understanding of the influence of misinformation on unsuspecting audiences and the implications for science, health, and politics;
- Learn to identify and critically analyze different forms of misinformation considered problematic and explore potential corrections and remedies;
- Examine related concepts that bear on misinformation acceptance such as motivated reasoning, cognitive bias, social conformity, identity protection, and cultural cognition;
- Develop an understanding of how misinformation spreads, including social media design and message virality, credibility cues, and factors that promote information sharing;
- Trace the distinctions between propaganda, misinformation, deceptive communication, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, placing them in historical context; and,
- Build an enhanced sense of media literacy throughout the seminar, with a heightened appreciation for accurate and ethical communication.
III. Methods of Assessment

Expected learning outcomes will be assessed through class discussion/participation, a short critique paper, take-home midterm, an original focus group analysis (including a peer review, in-class presentation, and final research paper), and final reflection essay. My grading scale follows on pg. 3.

IV. Required Readings

Individual readings, including book chapters and journal articles, will be available through a Course Dropbox folder, which can be joined from a link sent to the class list by e-mail. For a list of specific readings by week, see section VII below.

V. Course Assignments and Grading (for all assignments, guidelines will be provided)

Disinformation Critique (10%)

This assignment requires each student to identify a recent, substantial piece of disinformation, preferably one debunked by a fact-finding website or mainstream news organization, and analyze its particulars, persuasive mechanisms, and intended outcome(s). The analysis and critique should lay bare how and why this piece of “information” is deceptive. A short, 4-pg. essay unpacking the message’s appeals, mechanisms, packaging, and deceptive intent is due on Feb. 6.

Seminar Facilitation (5%)

During the semester (from Jan. 30–April 24) each student will be required to lead the class in a Facilitation, engaging the seminar in a 10-15 minute overview and discussion of a reading for a particular day. Facilitations must be completed by April 24, so be sure to look ahead and select a reading that interests you.

Take-Home Midterm (15%)

There will be a take-home midterm exam about halfway through the course, due on March 6, that will cover material from the readings, lectures, and discussions. Several questions will be posed, of which just one needs to be answered in a 5-6 pg., double-spaced response.

Disinformation Focus Group Project (50%)

For the Disinformation Focus Group Project each student will convene a group of 5 to 7 friends/family members to view and discuss several instances of disinformation (whether social media posts, deepfake videos, fake news, etc.). The goal is to gain insight into how disinformation works. A 10-12 pg. paper based on a transcript of the recorded discussion and responses to a demographic questionnaire (to be provided) is required, with the typed transcript attached. The paper and transcript are graded individually (10% for the questionnaires and transcript, 10% for the draft paper, 15% for the final paper, etc.), as are each element of the project.

The project is broken down into different parts, due between March 27 and May 1, consisting of a typewritten transcript and completed questionnaires, followed by a draft paper, peer review of someone else’s paper, and development of your final focus group paper. A PowerPoint presentation to the class, based on your focus group findings, is also required. Each element of the proposal will be graded separately, as indicated in the summary below.

Final Reflection Paper (10%)

In lieu of a final exam, students will write a 5-6 pg. take-home essay reflecting on what you have learned over the course of the semester and the aspects of disinformation you find most troubling, and why. This is an unprecedented moment in our technological and political development and should present a rich opportunity for reflection and analysis among thoughtful citizens—particularly in the context of a seminar about misinformation. Use citations where necessary and literature to
justify your positions but articulate what you consider the main concerns to be and most effective strategies for addressing the problem. Due May 13 by 10pm.

**Seminar Participation (10%)**

Graduate seminars require the *active involvement* of each seminar participant. Active participation entails asking questions, responding to questions posed (sometimes in “1-minute” response essays), integrating readings and commenting on what you’ve learned, presenting when assigned, and contributing meaningfully to seminar discussions throughout the semester. Active participation also entails regular attendance. In a graduate seminar, 3 or more absences over the semester are a cause for concern and will result in at least half a letter grade deduction from your final grade.

In summary, course assignments, grading percentages, and due dates are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Grade %</th>
<th>Due Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disinformation Critique</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Feb. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar Facilitation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Jan. 30 – April 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take-Home Midterm</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>March 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disinformation Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Questionnaires + Transcript</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>March 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Draft Focus Group Paper</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>April 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Peer Review</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>April 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Final Research Paper</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take-Home Reflection Paper</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>May 13 (by 10pm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation/“1-Minute” Essays</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>All semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
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<td>100%</td>
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**A Note About Grading**

Each of the above assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale. The grading scale is as follows: A 94-100; A- 93-90; B+ 89-87; B 86-84; B- 83-80; C+ 79-77; C 76-74; C- 73-70; D+ 69-67; D 66-64; D- 63-60; F 59 & lower. Any grade in the A range represents outstanding or exceptional work; work in the B range represents competent, but not quite brilliant, effort in the course. A grade of B- or lower in this (or any) graduate-level course suggests that the student’s work is lacking in some important way. Although a C traditionally means satisfactory at the undergraduate level, the standards in graduate school are such that a C represents seriously flawed work, and thus a failing grade. In this seminar that would mean doing the assignments but misunderstanding basic concepts or presenting them in an unacceptable form and not participating in seminar discussions. Any grade lower than C implies outright negligence of the course.

**VI. Additional Course Policies and Rules**

1. **Americans with Disabilities Act**

   Any student who has a disability that may affect his/her academic performance should contact the instructor as soon as possible so that necessary accommodations can be made. Students should present appropriate verification from Disabled Student Services in the Dean of Students Office (806) 742-2405.
2. Attendance

Class attendance and active participation are expected in graduate school and are vital to your success as a student. Remember that, in a class that meets only once a week, missing one class is the equivalent of skipping two. As mentioned under Seminar Participation above, 3 or more absences in this seminar will result in a lowering of your grade by at least half a letter grade. Absences will also lower your participation grade, and thus your overall grade. The instructor is not responsible for material missed due to an absence (notes, PowerPoint, etc.). If you are having problems, let me know as soon as possible. I also don’t give automatic incompletes. If you have important reasons for not meeting due dates, I can work with you—but please let me know in advance.

3. Absence due to Religious Observances

Religious holy day means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Texas Tax Code §11.20. A student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent from classes for the observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time after the absence. A student who is excused may not be penalized for the absence; however, the instructor may respond appropriately if the student fails to complete the assignment satisfactorily.

4. Academic Integrity

Cheating on exams or plagiarism or any form of violation of the University honor code is a serious offense and will receive a failing grade for that assignment. The work you turn in must be entirely your own. Do not submit the same paper to more than one class. All students are expected to be honorable and observe standards of conduct appropriate to a community of scholars and professionals. If any questions ever arise as to what constitutes academic dishonesty, please discuss the situation with me or consult our College statement on graduate student conduct (http://www.depts.ttu.edu/comc/graduate/policiesandhandbook/studentconduct/), the Texas Tech Student Handbook (see http://www.depts.ttu.edu/studentaffairs/), or the Academic Integrity section of campus OP 34.12 (http://www.depts.ttu.edu/opmanual/contents.php#34).

5. Civility Policy

The University supports an environment of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. It does not tolerate statements, behavior, or tokens that deride or disparage an individual or group because of race, ethnicity, creed or personal lifestyle. In line with maintaining a professional learning environment, please be respectful of and attentive to fellow seminar participants. The quality of the class relies on engaged discussion and debate. Consequently, please turn off mobile devices while in class and use laptops or tablets for academic purposes only.

6. Late Assignments and Incompletes

Late assignments will be accepted only under unusual circumstances on a case-by-case basis, and will be subject to a point deduction. No late work will be accepted a week past the due date. The only way to qualify for consideration of an incomplete is for extreme cause, to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

8. Originality of Seminar Work

Students should not submit work, even modified work, completed during a previous semester, whether at this institution or another university or college. Instances of “double dipping” will receive a zero. All seminar work is expected to be original, unique to this course, and the sole product of the individual seminar participant.
9. Recording of Class Materials

To encourage good listening and note-taking skills, I do not routinely share my PowerPoint presentations with students. In my experience, sharing results in unproductive habits during class and lack of course material integration because you lose the opportunity to apply and rehearse your own understanding of the material by listening, reading, and writing it down. I understand the convenience of occasionally taking a cell phone photo of a complicated slide—but not every slide. This goes for international as well as domestic students. I also appreciate how easy it is now to record each class using a voice memo app, but this intrudes on the privacy of everyone present, not just the instructor, and ultimately curbs the willingness of people to speak freely in class. Therefore, I do not consent to audio or video recording of class sessions. Recording a public talk is one thing, but an individual class session should be limited to the students in attendance on the day of class, with no further record kept.

VII. Course Schedule

Note: This course schedule is not fixed in stone. The instructor reserves the right to adjust the readings, due dates, and topics as necessary as the course progresses.

Week 1

Jan. 16 Introduction & Overview: The Landscape of Misinformation

Week 2

Jan. 23 Propaganda, Comp Prop, and Covert Persuasion: The Basics
Readings Ghosh & Scott (2018), “#Digitaldeceit”
Assignment Disinformation Critique Guidelines Distributed (due Feb. 6)
Seminar Facilitation Guidelines Distributed

Week 3

Jan. 30 Now This: Deepfakes, Visual Misinformation, and AI-Generated News
Vaccari & Chadwick (2018), “Deepfakes, a Dipshit, and Disinformation”
Silverman (2018), “How to Spot a Deepfake”
  • https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/obama-jordan-peelee-deepfake-video-debunk-buzzfeed
  • https://medium.com/@d1gi/faketubeai-generatednewsonyoutube233ad4684
Assignment Seminar Facilitations Begin
Week 4
Feb. 6 Origins of Misperceptions
Readings Frenda et al. (2013), “False Memories of Fabricated Political Events”
Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac (2013), “NASA Faked the Moon Landing”

Week 5
Feb. 13 Factual Information, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

Week 6
Feb. 20 Conspiracy Theories and Hoaxes
  • https://www.wsj.com/articles/howyoutubedrivesviewerstotheinternetsdarkestcorners1518020478
Assignment Focus Group Project Guidelines Provided

Week 7
Feb. 27 The Susceptibility of Social Media to Manipulation
Woolley & Guilbeault (2017), “Computational Propaganda in the USA”
Assignment Take-home Midterm Guidelines Distributed (due March 6)

Week 8
March 6 Cognitive Consistency, Schematic Knowledge, and Misinformation
Readings Balmas (2014), When Fake News Becomes Real”
Heider (1946), “Attitudes and Cognitive Organization”
Assignment Take-Home Midterms Due
Week 9
March 13  
Spring break – no class

Week 10
March 20  
Motivated Reasoning and Confirmation Bias
Readings  
Kunda (1990), “The Case for Motivated Reasoning”
Ecker et al. (2014), “Do People Keep Believing Because They Want To?”

Week 11
March 27  
Selective Exposure, Identity Protection, Cultural Cognition.
Readings  
Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy (2012), “Polarized Political Communication”
Kahan et al. (2007), “Culture and Identity-Protective Cognition”
Kahan et al. (2010), “Who Fears the HPV Vaccine”
Assignment  
Focus Group Transcripts + Questionnaires Due

Week 12
April 3  
Focus Group Analysis
Readings  
Vaismoradi et al. (2016), “Theme Development”

Week 13
April 10  
Deceptive Framing, Emotive Messaging, and Heuristic Cues
Readings  
Kahneman & Tversky (1979), “Prospect Theory”

Week 14
April 17  
Rejecting Science
Readings  
Lewandowsky & Oberauer (2016), “Motivated Rejection of Science”
Lewandowsky et al. (2013), “Perceived Consensus and Acceptance of Science”
Assignment  
Draft Focus Group Papers Due; Peer Review Guidelines Distributed

Week 15
April 24  
On Believing the Unbelievable: Can We Fact Check Our Way Out of It?
Readings  
Graves (2016), “Deciding What’s True”
Gilbert et al. (1990), “Believing the Unbelievable”

**Assignment**  Peer Reviews Due

Week 16

May 1          Media and Technology Literacy for All?

DCMS Committee (2018), “The Need for Digital Literacy”
Amazeen & Bucy (under review), “Conferring Resistance to Fake News”
boyd (2018), “You Think You Want Media Literacy…Do You?”
  • https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2

**Assignment** Final Focus Group Papers Due; Project Presentations

Week 17

May 13         Final Reflection Papers Due (by 10pm)


VIII. References & Additional Readings


Silverman, Craig (Nov. 16). This analysis shows how viral fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook. *Buzzfeed*. https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-realinews-on-facebook


