INF 385T - Misinformation & Disinformation

Fall 2024
Tuesdays 3:30-6:30pm | UTA 1.212

Instructor
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Office Hours over Zoom [by appointment](#)

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the iSchool sits on indigenous land. We would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Indigenous land. Moreover, we would like to acknowledge and pay our respects to the Carrizo & Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Lipan Apache, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, Tigua Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in Texas, here on Turtle Island.

Course Description

In this course, we will work to understand and address the challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and strategic manipulation in online environments. First, we will work to develop a deep understanding of the problem space. We will read and discuss existing research (both historical and contemporary) on how and why misinformation and disinformation spread. Next, we will explore the process, both personal and interpersonal, by which these issues can be approached and addressed in our own lives. This will involve reflecting on our own presuppositions, beliefs, and biases about information; and doing a project in which we apply the principles of Human-Centered Design to investigate different design directions for addressing misleading information. Students will gain important contextual knowledge and hands-on design experience that they can take into future professional domains (from education to policy to technology), where they can contribute to building more trustworthy information systems.

What will I learn?

Successfully completing this course will help you to:

- Describe the "problem" of online misinformation & disinformation from different perspectives (e.g., psychological, ethical, sociotechnical etc.)
- Design interventions that address mis- and disinformation
- Reflect on your own information diet & identify ways to make information spaces healthier through their own participation

How will I learn?

This is a project-style course that will meet for 180 minutes on Tuesdays. Some activities will focus on learning *for* your project and will include building a shared understanding of assigned readings through small group discussions and occasional short video/audio lecture presentations. Other activities will focus on learning *from* your project and will prioritize working and reflecting on project components in a hands-on setting.

What will I need to learn?

Prior knowledge of the subject is not required. You are expected to take initiative in learning or reviewing unfamiliar material. While you are welcome to take on technical projects, I will not provide support for those with less programming experience as this is NOT a required element of the course.

You will need to bring a laptop computer capable of going online to our class sessions. You do not need to buy any software. You also do not have to buy any textbooks for this course. All readings will be uploaded online on Canvas. In addition, I will provide links to additional and supporting readings as needed and appropriate.

How will I be graded on what I learn?

This semester, we will be experimenting with grading. Our goal here is twofold: reduce grade anxiety and support you in understanding what you're learning.

Part One - C/NC Assignments You will find in Canvas that all assignments are Complete/ Incomplete. This is not at all meant to encourage you to "phone it in." Rather, it is hoped that by disentangling these assignments from the existential threat of losing points, you will instead take risks, dedicate yourselves

to more interesting design topics, and worry less. You will still receive feedback from me and your peers. There will also be multiple opportunities for you to reflect, as a team, and as individuals on what we're doing in class and how it impacts how you are learning.

Part Two - Reflection Assignments You have one meta-reflection due at the end of the semester. This assignment (see Canvas) will be a longer reflection on your learning over the semester. This is where you convey what you learned for the semester, and you will assign yourself a grade (more information about this is forthcoming). Essentially, based on your learning, you will give yourself a mark on the 4.0 grade scale. You will also be required to schedule a 20-minute meeting with me during finals week to discuss this grade. We will have a brief conversation about the class and come to an agreement on your final grade collectively.

This grading approach is intended to emphasize your learning. So, it can be helpful to review our learning objectives and revisit them on occasion as these are relevant to your grade. It can also be helpful to reflect on what contributes to learning. For example, participation plays a very important role, as does aspiring to do high-quality, well-written work. You may expect to receive timely comments on your submitted work based on its clarity, organization, balance, amount of pertinent detail included, depth and clarity of evaluative and analytical comments, and preparation.

Note that I reserve the right to mark submitted work as not competed if it shows a lack of understanding of subject matter, is unclear or poorly organized, contains few or irrelevant details, does not follow directions etc. Late assignments will receive be marked as not completed unless the student has made prior arrangements with the instructor. If I see a pattern of you not turning in assignments, I will reach out to you, so that we can switch to contract grading.

You can read more about the rationale behind this grading approach here.

How can I succeed in this course?

Here are three things you can do that will help you succeed in this course:

- Be a co-designer! This course is new and in the spirit of participatory and human-centered design, we will be making some decisions about the pace and exact direction of the course together. Being open to collaboration with me, advocating for what's interesting to you and taking ownership of your own learning will be crucial.

- Show up! This course is based on interactive flipped classroom pedagogical models, so participation in class is critical to individual success and to the success of the course as a whole. I have very strong expectations of participation.

- Do the assigned readings and activities. Not having done so will make you a less effective participant in discussions. Moreover, this course will follow the design principle that your instructor should not be your first point of contact with new material. My responsibility will be to help you troubleshoot your understanding so the questions you show up with will matter.

Course Expectations

As the instructor, I expect:

- A commitment to engaged learning from each and every student. This includes being present and actively involved in our class sessions
- Students to act, think, and communicate with generosity and patience, and in productive and professional way
- Students to take an active role in helping shape this course because it is new
- Turning in nearly all the work. If I see a pattern of you not turning in assignments, I will reach out to you, so that we can switch to contract grading

Students can expect from the instructor:

- Engaged, active instruction on course content
- Quick responses to questions via email: within 24 hours during the week, and 48 hours on weekends
- Timely feedback on all assignments, which is usually 2 weeks from the due date
- A significant amount of autonomy regarding the material we cover and the topics we discuss

Course Activities

Readings

During each class meeting (weeks 1-14), we will discuss the readings that were assigned for that week. Prior to each class, you will have to:

1. Think about what came up for you in terms of what you found interesting, hard, provocative, stressful etc. Anything that you think would generate conversation in the group is fair game.

2. Go to a shared document for the session (a google slide-deck). Claim one page and use it as a canvas – populate it with words or images that will help the group think about the reading from your perspective. This could be your perspective on what is important in the reading, how you engaged with the reading, something concrete that you think we should investigate or some thoughts you'd like to share about yourself that are brought to your mind based on the read. We will leverage these pages in our class discussions.

All course readings will be available on the course Canvas site. Please make sure to complete all readings before coming to class each week. You will need to do independent research to locate additional readings for your final projects.

Reflections

We will be engaging in several reflection activities over the semester. Three times during the semester, you will write a short reflection about your learning experiences (e.g., what's been surprising, muddy, frustrating etc.). These reflections are intended to help you step outside your experiences, make sense of them and inform future learning. To achieve this, they will invite you to reflect on topics like:

Your response to one or more of the readings
Your response to classroom discussion
Your reflection on some aspect(s) of the week's topics not covered by the above.

In other reflection assignments, you will also be asked to investigate the use of your digital devices and apps, discovering how you might use them to consume news in healthier and more effective ways. This will help us explore how contemplative and reflective practices can offer insights and design principles for the development of new information practices and technologies.

The schedule for these reflections will be in the class schedule.

Course Project

This section is a rough draft. The project component will be more clearly defined on the first day of class.

Students will design small group projects to explore how they might address problematic or misleading content as information professionals. An overview of the key-milestones is included below.

1. *Brainstorm solution spaces: misinformation or disinformation; contexts; populations*
2. *Sketching activity; each group proposes 2 project ideas, 1 page total.*
3. *Project Proposal (commit to one idea). Proposals need to be at least 4 pages including a 2-page literature review. Sketch out your project in the following terms: What is the phenomenon, what do you propose to do, what skills will you practice/demonstrate, what will you deliver, what will count as success (i.e., how should we grade), why is this project interesting to you, and what will be challenging.*
4. *Literature Review*
5. *User Testing*
6. *Final Presentations & Deliverable*

Please note: Students and the instructor will co-design some parts of this course activity (e.g., the prompt for the project) to create more room to be innovative and direct our own learning.

Dialog with the Instructor

I will meet with each member of the class at least two times during the semester. The first meeting (30 minutes long) will take place during the first two weeks of the course. This meeting is meant to allow us to get to know one another--more than the "normal" online classroom setting usually permits. I am eager to hear what you're hoping to accomplish in the iSchool, what you're hoping to do afterwards, and also to answer any questions you might have--about the course, about me, or about anything else. The second meeting will take place towards the end of the semester to discuss what you learned in the course, and your suggestions for improving the course in the future. I will also ask you for input on your final grade.

Detailed Timeline w/ Course Content + Readings [Draft]

Changes to the schedule may be made at my discretion and if circumstances require (e.g. we might want to slow down or speed up depending on how we're feeling). It is your responsibility to note these changes when announced (although I will do my best to ensure that you receive the changes with as much advanced notice as possible).

Week	Class overview
1	**Introduction** Overview **Sign-up to meet with me 2:1** - **Required reading:** None
2	**Terms and Definitions** **Brainstorming Solution Spaces** - Design Q: How might we support others in grappling with mis/disinformation in a particular context? Brainstorm - who are the others, what is the context, what kind of support can we provide? **Inclusive learning discussion** - **Required reading:** Lexicon of Lies
3	**Misinformation and the Problem with More 'Critical' Thinking** **Milestone 0: Ideation Exercise - each person proposes 2 project ideas, 1 page total** **Required reading:** Argument Culture Ch 9 Did Media Literacy Backfire? **Optional reading:** Wired Shut Chapter 1
4	**Attentional economics, misinformation and COVID-19** **Media consumption investigation 1 due - Take an inventory of your information diet** **Milestone 1: Project direction + Literature benchmarking**

	Required reading: On Paying Attention How to Think / Why Science Makes Environmental Controversies Worse **Optional reading:** • Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response
5	**Media Manipulation** **Reflection 1 due** **Required reading:** Soviet Active Measures. pp.43-65 (Disinformation Mills) and pp.75-81 (role of the press) (the PDF page numbers are pp.55-77 & pp.87-93) On the Misinformation Beat • **Optional reading:** Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online
6	**Media Manipulation** **Milestone 2: Project direction update + design 'sketch'** **Required reading:** Soviet Active Measures. pp.43-65 (Disinformation Mills) and pp.75-81 (role of the press) (the PDF page numbers are pp.55-77 & pp.87-93) • On the Misinformation Beat
7	**Disinformation and Democracy I** **Media consumption investigation 2 due** **Required reading:** • Acting the Part Common-knowledge attacks on Democracy
8	**Disinformation around the World** **Results of testing of preliminary prototype**

	Project Groups Sign-up to meet with me **Required reading:** Architects of Networked Disinformation • Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's "Fifty-Cent Army"
9	**Disinformation as Collaborative Work** **Reflection 2 due** **Required readings:** Disinformation as Collaborative Work Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare. (book: first and last chapters)
10	**Problematic Information and Alternative Ways of Knowing I** **Results of testing of 2nd Iteration** • **Required readings:** How to think: Repulsions
11	**Problematic Information and Alternative Ways of Knowing II** **Media consumption investigation 3 due** • **Required readings:** Searching for Alternative Facts
12	**Problematic Information and Terror-Management Theory** • **Required readings:** The Worm at the Core
13	**Problematic Information and Ethics I** **Final Presentations DUE in-class** **Reflection 3 due** • **Required readings:** Technology and the Virtues Ch 1 and 6
14	• ----FALL BREAK----
15	**Problematic Information and Ethics II**

	Sign-up to meet with me 1:1 • **Final Project Report DUE**
16	**Wrap up and reflections** **Meta Reflection Due**

Course Policies

You are responsible for reading and following these course policies.

Instructor Communication: E-mail is the official mode of communication for the university and the most reliable means of contact for me. It is always helpful if your e-mail includes a targeted subject line that begins with "INF XX." Do not use the messaging facilities in Canvas; these messages do not arrive in my e-mail inbox. Please allow a 24-hour window for email responses and plan accordingly. If you would prefer to meet with me, please email me to arrange an appointment or use the Calendly Link provided on the syllabus and Canvas Page.

Copyright Notice: These materials may be protected by copyright. United States copyright law, 17 USC section 101, et seq., in addition to University policy and procedures, prohibit unauthorized duplication or retransmission of course materials.

Statement on Classroom Recording: To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Due to COVID-19 we may record course content. Class recordings are reserved only for the use of members of this class (students, TAs, and the instructor) and only for educational purposes. Recordings should not be shared outside the class in any form. Violation of this restriction could lead to Student Misconduct proceedings.

Sharing of Course Materials is Prohibited: No materials used in this class, including, but not limited to, lecture hand-outs, videos, assessments (quizzes, exams, papers, projects, homework assignments), in-class materials, review sheets, and additional problem sets, may be shared online or with anyone outside of the class unless you have my explicit, written permission. Unauthorized sharing of materials promotes cheating. It is a violation of the University's Student Honor Code and an act of academic dishonesty. I am well aware of the sites used for sharing materials, and any materials found online that are associated with you, or any suspected unauthorized sharing of materials, will be reported to Student Conduct and Academic Integrity in the Office of the Dean of Students. These reports can result in sanctions, including failure in the course. On original work: cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. If an assignment turned in for credit is found to have been plagiarized, you will receive a grade of 0 points and a formal reprimand in your student file. You will be subject to the University's disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course.

Policy on ChatGPT and Generative AI Tools: Generative AI is permitted in specific contexts and with acknowledgment. The emergence of generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT and DALL-E) has sparked interest among many learners in our discipline. The use of these tools for brainstorming ideas, exploring possible responses to questions or problems, and creative engagement with the materials may be useful for you as you work on your design project. However, it cannot be used in personal reflections and reading engagements. Please feel free to reach out to me well in advance of the due date of assignments for which you may be using generative AI tools and I will be happy to discuss what is acceptable.

Late assignments: I penalize late assignments. Students who anticipate difficulties with completing assignments on time should consult with the instructor as soon as possible so that alternate solutions can be discussed. When negotiated in advance, arrangements can often be made.

Style manual: Please use the American Psychological Association's style manual. In particular, please be sure to follow its citation formats and rules on language bias.

University Policies

You are responsible for reading and following these University policies.

Religious holy days: A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

Use of E-mail for Official Correspondence: All students should become familiar with the University's official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in their e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. It is recommended that e-mail be checked daily, but at a minimum, twice per week. The complete text of this policy and instructions for updating your e-mail address are available at http://www.utexas.edu/its/help/utmail/1564

Documented Disability Statement: You will need to provide documentation to the Dean of Students Office so the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities (SSB 4.104, 471-6259). Any student who requires special accommodations must obtain a letter that documents the disability from the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (471-6259 voice or 471- 4641 TTY for users who are deaf or hard of hearing). Present the letter to the professor at the beginning of the semester so that needed accommodations can be discussed. The student should remind the professor of any testing accommodations no later than five business days before an exam. If you plan to make use of specialized services through SSD please inform me before the second class meeting. For more information, visit http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/

Title IX and Texas SB 212 Reporting requirements: Title IX is a federal law that protects against sex and gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, unprofessional or inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature, dating/domestic violence and stalking at federally funded educational institutions. UT Austin is committed to fostering a learning and working environment free from discrimination in all its forms. When unprofessional or inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature occurs in our community, the university can:

1. Intervene to prevent harmful behavior from continuing or escalating.

2. Provide support and remedies to students and employees who have experienced harm or have become involved in a Title IX investigation.
3. Investigate and discipline violations of the university's relevant policies.

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. Although graduate teaching and research assistants are not subject to Texas Senate Bill 212, they are still mandatory reporters under Federal Title IX laws and are required to report a wide range of behaviors we refer to as sexual misconduct, including the types of sexual misconduct covered under Texas Senate Bill 212. The Title IX office has developed supportive ways to respond to a survivor and compiled campus resources to support survivors.

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.

University Resources for Students
The university has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning, use these to help you succeed in your classes

The University Writing Center
The University Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster students' resourcefulness and self-reliance. http://uwc.utexas.edu/

Counseling and Mental Health Center
The Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) provides counseling, psychiatric, consultation, and prevention services that facilitate students' academic and life goals and enhance their personal growth and well-being. http://cmhc.utexas.edu/

Basic Needs Security: Any student who faces challenges of affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believe this may affect their performance in the course, is encouraged to contact the Office of the Dean of Students – Student Emergency Services (SES) for support. Please notify the instructor if you are comfortable doing so and I will make efforts to provide any resources that I may possess to help you navigate issues of food insecurity or residential displacement.

● SES Concerns and Emergencies:

http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/concernsemergencies.php
● SES Food Pantry:
 http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/pantry.php
● SES Confidential Advocacy and Support:
http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/advocacysupport.php

Student Emergency Services
http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/

ITS
Need help with technology? http://www.utexas.edu/its/

Libraries
Need help searching for information? http://www.lib.utexas.edu/

Canvas
Canvas help is available 24/7 at
https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/student-tutorials

Important Safety Information

Behavior Concerns Advice Line (BCAL): If you are worried about someone who is acting differently, you may use the Behavior Concerns Advice Line to discuss by phone your concerns about another individual's behavior. This service is provided through a partnership among the Office of the Dean of Students, the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC), the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and The University of Texas Police Department (UTPD). Call 512-232-5050 or visit http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal .

Emergency Evacuation Policy: Occupants of buildings on the UT Austin campus are required to evacuate and assemble outside when a fire alarm is activated or an announcement is made. Please be aware of the following policies regarding evacuation:

● Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of the classroom and the building. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when you entered the building.

● If you require assistance to evacuate, inform me in writing during the first week of class.

● In the event of an evacuation, follow my instructions or those of class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless you are given instructions by the Austin Fire Department, the UT Austin Police Department, or the Fire Prevention Services office.

Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty: Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the

integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Student Judicial Services web site at http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/

University of Texas Core Values and Honor Code: The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community. As a student of the University of Texas at Austin, I shall abide by πthe core values of the University and uphold academic integrity.