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Social Media and Democracy
Draft Syllabus
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Course Description

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This course looks at media, social media, and related technologies and their impacts on society, politics, polarization, and conflict. First, we will be examining the ways that media has changed in recent decades (with most people getting their news online and from social media specifically) and how this impacts political news. Second, will also look at how users consume and spread misinformation, hate speech, and violence and incitement; how this is produced by bad actors; and examine impacts of this content for politics and social attitudes. Third, we will look at how authoritarian actors use social media and AI technologies to spread false news and polarize target societies. Fourth, we will examine the impacts of AI on information, trust, and campaigning. The course covers a range of research methods, including ethnography, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and field experiments, as well as the theoretical, logistical, and ethical aspects of conducting social science research.

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Basic Rules

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In-Class: You are expected to be present every session and to participate in class discussions and partner/group activities. You should make sure that you come to class having read all the readings for each day, and you should participate actively in our conversation about those readings. To help you digest the readings, I provide a reading worksheet at the end of this syllabus. We will complete it on one reading each week for the first couple of weeks to get you used to active reading. I encourage you to use the worksheet for at least one required reading assigned each week.

To create an atmosphere in which all students feel comfortable participating and have the ability to achieve their full potential, civility during the discussions is vital. During our conversations we will inevitably come to talk about day-to-day politics as it related to course themes, and it is very much possible that you will find yourself disagreeing with points put forward by your fellow students (and, they with you!). While you should absolutely feel free to challenge other students, it is crucial that you do so in a respectful way (and, of course, you can expect the same of your fellow students towards you). Also to create an atmosphere of learning in a seminar discussion setting, I will ask you to refrain from using your phones at all times and will ask you to close your laptops when note taking is not needed. You may use laptops for note taking at other times, but I will ask you to agree to avoid using social media, chat, or the internet while we are in class to keep the discussion and attention focused on what we discuss.

Absences: If for some reason you cannot be present for understandable reasons (illness, personal circumstances clearly beyond your control, etc.) you should contact me as soon as you can (if at all possible, before the start of class). One unexcused absence will not impact your grade, but more than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your participation grade. Also please note that informing me that you will be absent for work or other personal reasons is not a way to get an excused absence. I understand you are juggling different priorities, but taking this class assumes and expects you will attend all classes with rare exceptions.

Covid Policies: As of right now there are no specific Covid policies in place in this course. However, if conditions were to change we may have to adjust. That being said, if you are sick – Covid or otherwise – stay home, let me know, fill out the excused absence form, and get medical care if necessary. If you have any concerns or questions about any of this, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me. I can also work with you if serious issues require more than two excused absences – such as writing

Office Hours

If you have any questions or want to chat about the course, you can come to my office hours on Tuesdays between 1 and 2 PM or by appointment after class and by zoom on off days. You do not need to make an appointment for this time slot - so if you want to chat feel free to drop by! Also, it's fine to stop by if you want to talk about the course more broadly and you don't really have specific questions. Office hours are a really helpful way to get feedback and questions answered about upcoming exams or assignments, so make sure you use them! Also I am happy to help you understand readings in office hours or meetings by appointment. If you find yourself having trouble understanding the readings, especially after classes where we discuss the readings, please reach out and we can talk through it. You should feel comfortable participating if you are doing the readings and I can help you get more comfortable with the readings 1:1.

Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all of the readings if you wish to consult them during class. And I will make lecture slides available before class for you to print out – will at latest make them available right after class. This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops hinders learning not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately distracting and cognitively taxing. In addition, research suggests that students take notes more effectively in long-hand than they do on laptops. (Exceptions will of course be made for students with disabilities who need to use a laptop or for other special circumstances. Please contact me if you would like to discuss your learning needs further.)

Slack for class discussion and questions

Students often want to ask questions about the scientific articles we read for class or share interesting material they encountered that is related to what we are studying. We will use Slack to facilitate these conversations — the app makes it possible for you to more effectively learn from each other outside of class and also to benefit from my answers to other people's questions. Please note that you can of course email me privately at any time, come to office hours, etc. With that said, I will often encourage you to post questions and/or answers we discuss via email to Slack because it allows us to benefit from the collective intelligence of the class as a group. You can also share relevant articles outside class assignments for discussion on slack. In particular, I will ask you to post comments and questions on the readings before each class on Slack.

Large language model policy (e.g., ChatGPT)

Use of AI tools such as ChatGPT is permitted in this course for the following
purposes:
• Asking for help understanding concepts or research studies
• Asking for feedback on a paper or tutoring on a concept
• Asking for help brainstorming or outlining
• Asking for help identifying and correcting grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors

The following uses are not permitted:

- Submitting AI-generated text (either verbatim or in edited form) in papers or other written assignments. This is strictly prohibited in this class as you need to learn to write in your own words and in your own voice based on how you understand the concepts we discuss.
- Please provide a description of exactly how you used AI tools in any assignment you submit in which they were employed. As always, please remember that you are ultimately responsible for the work you submit, including verifying that it is correct. In general, I encourage you to reflect on how to most effectively use AI tools. First, depending on them may undermine your own learning and hinder understanding of class concepts. Second, large language models often give wrong answers that are difficult for non-experts to detect. You are responsible for the accuracy and quality of the work that you submit. If you have questions about this policy, please ask me!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Your final grade will be based on the following components:

15% - **Class Participation**. Since this is a seminar course, attendance is obligatory. An active role in discussions and class activities by everyone enrolled in the course is expected, as is the completion of required readings before the class session for which they are assigned.

Each student is permitted one unexcused absence (i.e. without a written note from a doctor or a dean). Additional unexcused absences will affect the participation grade.

5% - Follow News on Social Media and Technology. You will be asked to pick an area of focus and follow technology and politics in the news. You can choose a platform (Meta, Twitter, TikTok), a technology (Gen AI), or a specific strategy (Russian disinformation). You will be asked to post on what you are reading and to write a summary memo on the key insights from following this news at the end of the semester. If you find a think tank that closely follows social media in way that is tied to current trends, you can also choose to follow these. I encourage you to find coverage on social media outside the US and Europe as well. And podcasts related to social media, AI, etc. are also acceptable if there is an element of news coverage and current events.

Places to find news on social media can be found at the following links for example:
- [NYT Social Media Coverage](#)
- [CNBC Social Media Coverage](#)
- [BBC Social Media Coverage](#)
- [Tech Crunch Social Media News](#)
- [Wired Social Media Coverage](#)
- [Economist Social Media Coverage](#)

10% - Present An Assigned Article as if You Wrote It. Students will present a paper assigned in class. You should try to understand the paper as well as possible and present slides on the paper as if it was your own. I will provide an example for the class as a model and you can reference lectures which often do this as well. As a note, when you present an article as if it was your own, you want to think about how to frame the article; what question is being asked; what data is being used and why (government data, surveys, interviews history, etc); what method is being used to analyse data; what the arguments are and why they are justified; etc. Think like the author and be prepared to respond briefly to questions from the discussant. You can sign up for articles and class sessions as a presenter in Week 2.

5% - Serve as a discussant on an assigned article. Each student will serve as a discussant of a required reading presented by a classmate. As a discussant you will critically engage with the article, raise questions relevant to the class, and consider how the article speaks to larger debates. You can also think of question raised by the article and new research possibilities that follow from the conclusions, methods, and arguments of the article.

10% - Response Papers. Each student will complete two response papers on the readings of a class session of their choice – on a first-come-first-serve basis. Response paper should critically engage with all readings for that session and be submitted online before the start of class.

40% - **Research Design**. You will be asked to develop a research design to examine a research question related to the course. The proposal will include a substantively motivated research question, literature review and testable hypotheses, detailed research design (including a discussion of why you chose one method over its alternatives), and analysis plan. It will be graded for its feasibility and the thought that you show in selecting your method and explaining how you will use the selected method(s).

Course Schedule, Weekly Topics, and Assigned Readings

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: What is Social Media and How Has it Changed the Way We Get Information?

Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, Introduction.

Iyengar, Shanto & Kinder, Don. 1987. *News That Matters*, chapter 1.

Gillespie, Tarleton. 2014. "The Relevance of Algorithms." In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot, pp. 167–193. MIT Press.

Listen Before Class: "How the Attention Economy is Devouring Gen Z." Ezra Klein Show.

Week 3: Are Social Media Ecosystems (and its risks) Different in the Global South?

Panel Discussion of Content Moderation and Academic Experts: Diane Change, Theodora Skeadas, and TBA.

Rao, Ursula, and Sahana Udupa. 2020. "Digital Politics in the Global South." *Media, Culture & Society* 42(3): 319–324.

Banaji, Shakuntala, and Ram Bhat. 2021. "Social Media and Religious Polarization in India: 'Love Jihad' and Digital Nationalism." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 14(2): 250–269.

"A Platform Accountability Assessment Framework for Global Majority Elections." The Global Institute.

Week 4: Is Social Media Changing Activism and Participation?

Bohdanova, Tetyana. 2014. "Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising." *European View* 13 (1)133-142.

Fergusson, Leopoldo, and Carlos Molina. 2019. "Facebook Causes Protests." *Documento CEDE* 41.

Finkel, Neundorf & Ramírez (2024). "Can Online Civic Education Induce Democratic Citizenship?" *AJPS.*

Bond, Robert M., Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler. *2012. "A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization." Nature 489 (7415): 295–298.*

Week 5: How is Social Media and AI Changing Local News?

Possible Guest Panel: Eric Chen and Juan Manuel Benítez, Columbia School of Journalism.

Brookings. "Local Journalism in Crisis. Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms."

Napoli, Philip M. 2015. "Social Media and the Public Interest: Governance of News Platforms in the Realm of Individual and Algorithmic Gatekeepers." *Telecommunications Policy* 39(9): 751–760.

Ferrucci, Patrick, and Jacob L. Nelson. 2019. "The New Anchors: How Journalists on Social Media Have Become the Local News." *Journalism Practice* 13 (6): 702–717.

Nieman Lab. 2022. "Local News Will Come to Rely on AI." *Nieman Journalism Lab*, December 2022. https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/12/local-news-will-come-to-rely-on-ai

Week 6: Technology and Surveillance: Digital Authoritarianism

Deibert, Ronald J. 2019. "The Road to Digital Unfreedom: The Threat of Internet Censorship and Surveillance." *Journal of Democracy* 30(1): 25–39.

Part 2: Hate and Misinformation

Week 6: Hate Speech and Radicalization

Benesch, Susan. 2012. *Dangerous Speech: A Proposal to Prevent Group Violence.* Washington, DC: World Policy Institute.

Munger, Kevin, and Joseph Phillips. 2022. "Right-Wing YouTube: A Pathway to Radicalization?" *Political Communication* 39 (3) 367–389.

Ebner, Julia. 2021. *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists.* Bloomsbury, Introduction and Chapter 4.

Kauntia, Nishant. 2021. "Inflammatory content targeted Muslims on Facebook, WhatsApp ahead of Delhi Riots: Internal records." Medianama.

Week 7: Countering the Spread of Hate Speech and Othering Rumors

Benesch, Susan. 2020. "Countering Dangerous Speech to Prevent Violence." *Social Science Research Council, Items.*

Meta Oversight Board. 2023. "Reducing the Spread of Hate Speech: Lessons from Content Moderation." *Case Summary Report.*

Thomas, Daniel R., and Laila A. Wahedi. 2023. "Disrupting Hate: The Effect of Deplatforming Hate Organizations on Their Online Audience." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (PNAS) 120 (24) e2214080120.

Stecklow, Steve. 2018. "Why Facebook Is Losing the War on Hate Speech in Myanmar." *Reuters Investigates,* August 15, 2018.

Recommended: Majumdar, Rajeshwari. 2023. "Reducing Prejudice and Support for Religious Nationalism Through Conversations on WhatsApp"

Week 8: Misinformation and Disinformation: How It Works

Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston. 2018. *"The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions." European Journal of Communication* 33, (2) 122–139.

Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N. Howard. 2018. "The Global Organization of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns." *Journal of International Affairs* 71 (1.5): 23–32.

Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand. 2018. "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News." *Journal of Experimental Psychology*: General 147(12): 1865–1880.

Recommended: Berinsky, Adam J. 2023. *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It.* Princeton University Press. Chapter 6 ("The Role of Political Elites").

Week 9: Misinformation and Affective Polarization

Ursula Daxecker, Hanne Fjelde, and Neeraj Prasad (forthcoming). "Misinformation, Narratives, and Intergroup Attitudes: Evidence from India." *Journal of Politics*.

Badrinathan, Sumitra, Simon Chauchard, & Niloufer Siddiqui. 2024. "Misinformation and Support for Vigilantism: An Experiment in India and Pakistan." *American Political Science Review*, Volume 119 (2) 947–965.

Week 10: Social Media, GenAI, and the U.S. and Indian Elections

Sheikh, Shahana. 2024. "How Technology Is (and Isn't) Transforming Election Campaigns in India." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 7, 2024.

Bhatia, Rukmini. 2023. "Inside India's WhatsApp Election Machine." *Rest of World*.

Soubhik Barari, Christopher Lucas, and Kevin Munger (forthcoming). "Political Deepfakes Are as Credible as Other Fake Media and (Sometimes) Real Media." *Journal of Politics*s

McGregor, Shannon C., and Daniel Kreiss. 2024. "Influencers, Algorithms, and the New Campaign Playbook." *Political Communication* 41 (3): 257–281.

Recommended: West, Sarah Myers. 2023. "The Infrastructures of Generative AI." *Social Media + Society* 9 (2): 1-10.

Week 11: Social Media, Misinformation, and Covid-19

Graham, Matthew H., and Shikhar Singh. 2024. "An Outbreak of Selective Attribution: Partisanship and Blame in the COVID-19 Pandemic." *American Political Science Review* 118 (2) 1–20.

Roozenbeek, Jon, Claudia R. Schneider, Sarah Dryhurst, John Kerr, Alexandra LJ Freeman, Gabriel Recchia, Anne Marthe Van Der Bles, and Sander Van Der Linden. 2020. "Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world." *Royal Society Open Science* 7 (10) 201199.

World Health Organization. 2020. *Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviors and Mitigating the Harm from Misinformation and Disinformation.* Geneva: World Health Organization.
https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation

Week 12: Fighting Misinformation

Wood, Thomas, and Ethan Porter. 2021. "The Global Effectiveness of Fact-Checking: Evidence from Simultaneous Experiments in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (37).

Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. 2010. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32 (2), 303-330

Roozenbeek et al. (2022). "Psychological Inoculation Improves Resilience Against Misinformation on Social Media." *Science Advances*

Badrinathan, Sumitra. 2021. "Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation: Evidence from a field experiment in India." *American Political Science Review* 115 (4) 1325-1341.

Week 13: Is Content Moderation Dead and Does It Matter?

Goldstein, Ian, Laura Edelson, Minh-Kha Nguyen, Oana Goga, Damon McCoy, & Tobias Lauinger. 2023. "Understanding the (In)Effectiveness of Content Moderation: A Case Study of Facebook in the Context of the U.S. Capitol Riot."

Barrett, Paul M., and Justin Hendrix. 2024. "Is Generative AI the Answer for the Failures of Content Moderation?" *TechPolicy.Press*, April 3, 2024.

Jackson, Dean, and Samuel Woolley. 2025. "AI's Real Dangers For Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 36 (4) 139-150.

Evans, Benedict. 2021. "[Is Content Moderation a Dead End?](#) *BenedictEvans.com*, April 13, 2021.

Session 14: Course Conclusion and Paper Presentations

Students will present short presentations on their seminar paper drafts in the first hour (about 5-8 minutes). We'll conclude the course in the second hour.