

INTRODUCTION TO INFORMATION MANIPULATION

A University Course Plan

ADAC.IO Publication

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Course plan

Overview

This course introduces university students to the multifaceted phenomenon of information manipulation. A special focus lies on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. The course was successfully tested with students from a B. A. program “Journalism” and an M. A. program “Strategic Communications”. Accompanying the course syllabus are materials suggested for each lesson, including a total of 12 sets of slides, links to interactive materials and a glossary containing definitions of 100+ conceptual terms related to information manipulation.

The course is structured in four modules with a total of 14 lessons. The modules encompass a discussion of traditional and contemporary concepts and terms related to information manipulation (module 1), contextual factors influencing the spread and impact of manipulative content (module 2), the characteristics of strategic campaigns to understand information manipulation campaigns (module 3) and countermeasures, including both short-term mitigation tactics and long-term societal resilience (module 4).

Legend

-  = Session literature
-  = Slide set for the session
-  = Group exercises for 3 to 4 students
-  = Further materials for group exercises (detailed instructions in the associated slides)

Modules and Lessons


1. Module 1 – Introducing and Reflecting on Concepts and Terms Related to Information Manipulation

Description: Phenomena such as disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories have been around for a long time, both as public communication issues during war- and peacetime and as subjects of academic debate. As such, research on information manipulation and information disorders has a long tradition across various academic disciplines, including political science, communication studies, philosophy and psychology. This module explores some key terms that describe certain facets of information manipulation in traditional and contemporary research. It reflects on how definitions changed over time and critically discusses their respective advantages and limitations.

1.1. Online Harms and “Information Disorders”: Misinformation, Disinformation and Malinformation

 Slide set 1.1: Disinformation, Misinformation, Malinformation and Fake News

1.2. Propaganda

 Slide set 1.2 – Definitions and Types of Propaganda


 “Mind Over Media: Analyzing Contemporary Propaganda” ([here](#))

1.3. Conspiracy Theories

 Slide set 1.3 – Definitions and Examples of Conspiracy Theories

1.4. Bullshit, Rumours, Systemic Lies, and “Shock-and-Chaos”

 Slide set 1.4 – Bullshit, Rumours, Systemic Lies, Shock-and-Chaos


 McCright, A. M., & Dunlap, R. E. (2017). Combatting misinformation requires recognizing its types and the factors that facilitate its spread and resonance. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4) ([doi](#))

2. Module 2 – Contextual Factors Influencing the Spread and Impact of Manipulative (Online) Content

Description: Disinformation and information manipulation do not occur in a vacuum. The spread and impact of false information and inflammatory content depend on a number of contextual factors at different levels of analysis that are explored in this module. After reflecting on the diagnosis of the so-called Post-truth era, the module takes a closer look at manipulative rhetoric on a content level, cognitive biases on a psychological level and social network dynamics such as echo chambers on a sociological level of analysis. The interactive materials proposed for the sessions make the logic behind the concepts and the mechanisms that work on a psychological and social level more tangible.

2.1. Post-truth Culture


 Slide set 2.1 – Post-truth Culture, Truthiness and Alternative Facts


 Wu, H. D. (2023). Post-truth public diplomacy: a detrimental trend of cross-national communication and how open societies address it. *Journal of International Communication*, 29(1) ([doi](#))

2.2. Manipulative Rhetoric

 Slide set 2.2 – Manipulative Rhetoric

2.3. “Cognitive Biases”: Social Group and Information-processing Mechanisms

 Slide set 2.3 – Social Group and Information-processing Mechanisms

 “The Cognitive Bias Codex” ([here](#))

2.4. Social Networks and Echo Chamber Dynamics

 Slide set 2.4 – A Simulation of Echo Chamber Dynamics

 “Complexity Explorables” ([here](#))

3. Module 3 – Strategic Campaigns and Coordinated Information Manipulation: Information Manipulation Campaigns

Description: This module broadens the perspective on coordinated information manipulation activities by introducing the concepts of strategic communication campaigns and information manipulation campaigns. This is crucial, as understanding information manipulation campaigns unlocks the path to understanding complex phenomena and contemporary analytical perspectives such as astroturfing, Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. Interactive online games convey the mechanisms of information manipulation campaigns. Building on this, the module introduces analytical tools such as ABCDE and the DIS-ARM Framework.

3.1. Strategic Communication Campaigns and Information Manipulation Campaigns

- 📄 Slide set 3.1 – Strategic Communication Campaigns and Information Manipulation Campaigns

3.2. Tactics, Techniques and Mechanisms of Information Manipulation Campaigns

- 📄 Slide set 3.2 – Some Techniques of Information Manipulation Campaigns

- ✎ Online games “Bad News” ([here](#)) and “Harmony Square” ([here](#))

3.3. Introducing Frameworks for the Analysis of Information Manipulation Campaigns

- 📄 Slide set 3.3 – ABCDE and the DISARM Frameworks

- 📖 Pamment (2020). The ABCDE Framework. The EU’s Role in Fighting Disinformation: Crafting A Disinformation Framework ([here](#))

- 📖 Further reading: The ADAC.io *Information Influence Operation Attribution Framework* ([here](#)) gives an overview over different types of information and data accesses for analysing information manipulation campaigns, especially attribution, aiming to foster information sharing between different stakeholders such as journalists, researchers, NGOs, companies and government agencies.

3.4. Coding Exercise using the DISARM Framework

- ✎ Coding Exercise Materials and DISARM Navigator ([here](#))

4. Module 4 – Countermeasures Against Information Manipulation: Incident-based Interventions and Long-term Resilience

Description: The last module of the course focusses on what to do about information manipulation from short-term and long-term perspectives. The short-term perspective deals with interventions to mitigate the effects of individual incidents of disinformation and manipulation. This includes debunking, prebunking, inoculation and nudging. The long-term perspective deals with the roles that different areas and stakeholders of society – such as government agencies, digital platforms, education, journalists, media organisations, advertising and others – can and do play for long-term societal resilience against domestic and foreign information manipulation. In addition to their individual roles, it is also discussed how the various areas should interact with each other for a whole-of-society approach to information resilience.

4.1. Psychological Interventions Against Incidences of Information Manipulation (Short-term perspective)

- 📄 Slide set 4.1 – Psychological Interventions and their Implementation

4.2. The role of different actors of society in information defence and resilience (Long-term perspective)

- 📖 Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2022). Optimising emotions, incubating falsehoods. In Springer eBooks, Chapter 8 ([doi](#))

- 🧑🎓 According to the authors, what societal actors play a key role in increasing societal resilience against information manipulation? (For the instructor: Let each group summarise the actors from one area of society the authors distinguish in chapter 8) How do the different areas interlock?



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