# USCAnnenberg

**DSM 599: Digital Misinformation Strategy and Defense (4 units)**

**Spring 2023 – Wednesdays, 6:30-9:20 PM**
**Section:** 21865
**Location:** ASC 231

**Instructor: Andy Lutzky**
**Office Hours:** by appointment
**Contact Info:** alutzky@usc.edu; (650) 281-9023
andylutzky.com

## Course Description

This course explores the world of misinformation and disinformation, investigating how digital media plays a role in its spread, and how digital media may be used to counteract its impact.

The course is designed for DSM students who want to familiarize themselves with the emerging world of digitally scaled information spread. By the end of the course, students will learn how to identify digital misinformation, and be better prepared for post-graduate roles that require analyzing, planning, and implementing programs to counteract scaled digital misinformation. Consequently, the course will also cover the basic mechanics of using digital media to scale messages, beliefs and behaviors of any kind, providing students an understanding of how to operate in sophisticated digital media environments of many types.

It will also cover the basics of how humans ingest information, make decisions based on content, spread those decisions to others, become hardened in those stances, and how digital media affects those processes.

The course will examine four elements of the world of digital misinformation. First, students will dive into misinformation theory, understanding why misinformation works, learned alongside examples of misinformation campaigns in world history. The second module will explore the intersection of misinformation and digital media, uncovering how the internet has scaled digital misinformation efforts, supercharging them with increased potency. Third, the class will perform a critical analysis of digital misinformation in the world today, contextualizing the course within current events, and helping students to become clear-eyed on how and why certain events have transpired. The course will culminate by addressing how brands, governments and organizations could and should engage with digital misinformation, as well as assessing the future of digitally scaled information spread.

As misinformation science is evolving rapidly in real time, this class, too, will evolve over the course of the semester in reaction to current events.

## Student Learning Outcomes

- Obtain a surface-level understanding of the neuroscience and behavioral science of how people make decisions, and how content, trust and modern information-spreading platforms capitalize on the science.
- Understand how digital platforms play both a positive and a negative role in the spreading of misinformation and disinformation.
- Learn how to identify misinformation and disinformation in earned and social media.
- Conceptualize how brands and government organizations can fight misinformation and disinformation.
- Prepare for a world where alternative facts, synthetic content and algorithmic scaled distribution of ideas complicate truth, progress and organizational objectives.

## Course Notes

Lecture slides and notes will be provided on Blackboard following each lecture. When classes are held via Zoom, the recordings will be provided following the class.

## Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the **Annenberg Digital Lounge** for more information. To connect to USC's Secure Wireless network, please visit USC's **Information Technology Services** website.

## Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Successful completion of this class will require reading from a number of books and selected Internet articles/research papers, to be completed by the dates mentioned in the syllabus.

*Books:*
- ❖ Adam Grant, "Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know," February 2, 2021
- ❖ Caitlin O'Connor & James Owen Weatherall, "The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread." December 11, 2018
- ❖ Max Fisher, "The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World." September 6, 2022
- ❖ Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, Brian Friedberg, "Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America." September 20, 2022

Please see the syllabus for a full list of Internet articles and research paper assignments. **Reading assignments, especially Internet articles, are subject to change** based on current events.

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

Please see below for the summaries of the assignments for the semester. More detail on each assignment will be provided at a later date.

- Misinformation Design. You and a team of classmates will design a misinformation campaign. I will assign a misinformation design challenge, and you and your team will need to apply what you have learned about effective misinformation design to achieve the goals I specify. You and your teammates will present your campaign in class.
- Misinformation Defense. You will work individually, on behalf of a brand or government organization that I assign, to defend yourselves against a misinformation campaign. You will need to apply the principles you learned in class about defending brands and governments against misinformation. You will submit this project digitally on Blackboard.
- "War Games X". In our second-to-last class, we will conduct a live-action roleplay of information warfare. The class will be split into five groups, representing the incumbent government party, the challenger government party, big brands, fringe internet communities, and the media. Each group will be graded on how well their faction performs.
- Final project: Develop a plan for a brand/government organization in response to digital misinformation challenge provided by the professor. Some students may be assigned to design the misinformation campaign, while others may be assigned to stop the campaign.
- Reactions to assigned content

## Participation

Every student will be expected to bring ideas and enthusiasm to every class. It will be critical to share your work and your thinking with each other. Your active engagement with the course content in the classroom and online will

be critical to your success.

**Note for Online Participation:** Online class and meetings are a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable situation to be in. The reality is that more business is conducted online through social platforms (like Slack) and through webcam/telepresence (including Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.) than ever before. Because of this, when we host class digitally, turning on your camera is **strongly encouraged**. Your personal authentic individualism and participation is encouraged. For online students, all mics will be muted unless you wish to comment or engage in discussion (then please re-mute your mic after contributing).

## Grading Breakdown

| Assessment Tool (assignments) | Points | % of Grade |
|---|---|---|
| Misinformation Design | 200 | 20% |
| Misinformation Defense | 200 | 20% |
| War Games X | 200 | 20% |
| Final project | 300 | 30% |
| Reactions to assigned content | 100 | 10% |
| **TOTAL** | **1,000** | **100%** |

## Course Grading Scale

| Letter grade and corresponding numerical point range | | |
|---|---|---|
| 95% to 100%: A | 80% to 83%: B- | 67% to 69%: D+ |
| 90% to 94%: A- | 77% to 79%: C+ | 64% to 66%: D |
| 87% to 89%: B+ | 74% to 76%: C | 60% to 63%: D- |
| 84% to 86%: B | 70% to 73%: C- | 0% to 59%: F |

## Classroom Policies
- The world of digital misinformation is changing in real time. With new research, and live examples, occurring in the world every day, what was a "best practice" at the start of the semester may become out of date by the end of the semester. In an effort to provide you the most current, cutting-edge education possible, the syllabus will likely adjust throughout the semester. I am conscious that changes to assignments, readings, and lecture material can be disruptive, and could make the course seem hard to follow. Changes will only be made when truly necessary, and students will be informed promptly. My request to you is for patience, agility, and flexibility.
- Discussions about digital misinformation will inevitably cover topics where students have different beliefs, such as politics, policies, personalities, social media content, and much more. Your experience in this class will be greatly enriched with your discussion and perspectives. However, you may not always agree with your fellow students' perspectives. You don't have to agree, but you do have an obligation to remain respectful. Observe the following rules during in-class discussion and assignments:

- Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said. Challenge one another, but do so respectfully.
- No interrupting or yelling.
- Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own.
- If we wish to challenge something that has been said, we will challenge the idea or the practice referred to, not the individual sharing this idea or practice. Challenge respectfully, and constructively.
- Try to see the issue from the other person's perspective before stating your opinion.
- It is okay to be emotional about issues and to name those emotions.
- Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others will think about what you say.
- Don't use unnecessarily offensive examples.
- If you are offended by anything said during discussion, acknowledge it immediately.
- Consider anything that is said in class strictly confidential. We want to create an atmosphere for open, honest exchange.
- Do not remain silent. Make sure to contribute to the discussion.
- State your name before making your statement, so other students can reference your statement properly.
- If responding or reacting to a statement by another student, indicate by name the student whom you are referencing.
- It is OK to ask questions about course material at any time. "The only bad questions are the questions that go unasked."

## Attendance

Class will begin promptly at the listed start time. Being late will result in you missing a vital portion of the day's lesson. Class participation and in-class assignments missed due to unexcused absences cannot be made up.

More than three unexcused absences during the term may result in you being dropped from the class or suffer from a severe point loss. If you need to be late or absent for a period, please consult with me ASAP (via any of the provided methods of communication) so that we can plan to continue your participation in the class so that you may finish the class.

If you arrive very late (e.g., over one hour from the start of class) this is considered as absent (especially since this is over half the class), unless prior arrangements have been made with me.

| Letter Grade | Description |
|---|---|
| A | Excellent; demonstrates extraordinarily high achievement; comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subject matter; all expectations met and exceeded. |
| B | Good; moderately broad knowledge and understanding of subject matter; explicitly or implicitly demonstrates good, if not thorough understanding; only minor substantive shortcomings. |
| C | Satisfactory/Fair; reasonable knowledge and understanding of subject matter; most expectations are met; despite any shortcomings, demonstrates basic level of understanding. |
| D | Marginal; minimal knowledge and understanding of subject matter; more than one significant shortcoming; deficiencies indicate only the most rudimentary level of understanding. |
| F | Failing; unacceptably low level of knowledge and understanding of subject matter; deficiencies indicate lack of understanding. |

## Grading Timeline

Assignments will typically be graded within one week of the due date. I will keep you updated on assignments that require longer to grade.

## Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will automatically be given a grade of F.

Assignments must be submitted via Blackboard unless otherwise noted.

## Add/Drop Dates for Session 001
## (15 weeks: 1/9/2023 – 4/28/2023; Final Exam Period: 5/3-10/2023)

**Link: https://classes.usc.edu/term-20231/calendar/**
**Last day to add:** Friday, January 27, 2023
**Last day to drop without a mark of "W" and receive a refund:** Friday, January 27, 2023
**Last day to change enrollment option to Pass/No Pass or Audit:** Saturday, January 28, 2023 [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]
**Last day to add/drop a Monday-only class without a mark of "W" and receive a refund or change to Audit:** Tuesday, January 31, 2023
**Last day to withdraw without a "W" on transcript or change pass/no pass to letter grade:** Friday, February 24, 2023 [Mark of "W" will still appear on student record and STARS report and tuition charges still apply.
*Please drop any course by the end of week three for session 001 (or the 20 percent mark of the session in which the course is offered) to avoid tuition charges.]
**Last day to drop with a mark of "W":** Friday, April 7, 2023

## Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

*Important note to students:* Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.

|  | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework<br>* to be completed before the start of class | Deliverable/Due Dates<br>* to be completed before the start of class |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 1**<br>**1/11** | Intro, Terminology, + Identifying Misinformation |  |  |
| **Week 2**<br>**1/18** | Trust and Content | • Kevin Young, "Moon Shot: Race, a Hoax, and the Birth of Fake News," *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2017<br>• Megan Brenan, "Americans' Trust In Media Remains Near Record Low," *Gallup*, October 18, 2022<br>• Tom Wright, "The Origin of Vibes," *The Atlantic*, July 5, 2022 |  |

| | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework<br>* to be completed before the start of class | Deliverable/Due Dates<br>* to be completed before the start of class |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | • Ezra Klein, "I Didn't Want It to Be True, but the Medium Really Is the Message," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2022 | |
| **Week 3**<br>**1/25** | How People Decide Things + Biases | • Ecker, Lewandowski, Cook, Schmid, Fazio, Brashier, Kendeou, Vraga, & Amazeen. "The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction," January 12, 2022 | Complete "Think Again" |
| **Week 4**<br>**2/1** | How Digital Changed Everything: Scale, Algorithms, Echo Chambers + Filter Bubbles | • Arguedas, Robertson, Fletcher, and Nielsen, "Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: a literature review," *The Reuters Institute*, January 19, 2022 | |
| **Week 5**<br>**2/8** | Case Study 1: Loose Change | • Kevin Roose, "How A Viral Video Bent Reality," *The New York Times,* September 8, 2021<br>• "We're Going to Take Over The World," *The Daily* (New York Times podcast), September 10, 2021 | |
| **Week 6**<br>**2/15** | The Modern Landscape of Media Trust: Fact Checking, Deepfakes, + Synthetic Media | • Marc Tracy, "Trump Is Gone, but the Media's Misinformation Challenge Is Still Here," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2021<br>• Anya van Wagtendonk, "Can fact-checking solve the misinformation pandemic?" *Grid*, January 12, 2022<br>• Derek Thompson, "Trump's Lies Are a Virus, and News Organizations Are the Host," *The Atlantic*, November 19, 2018<br>• Casey Newton, "The age of synthetic media has begun," *Platfomer*, September 29, 2022<br>• Joan Donovan and Britt Paris, "Deepfakes and Cheap Fakes: The Manipulation of Audio and Visual Evidence," Data & Society, September 2019<br>• Henry Ajder et. al., "The State of Deepfakes: Landscape, Threats, Impact," *Deeptrace*, September 2019 | Complete "The Misinformation Age" |

| | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework<br>* to be completed before the start of class | Deliverable/Due Dates<br>* to be completed before the start of class |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 7**<br>**2/22** | Algorithms + Technology Tools For "Engagement" | • "Information Overload Helps Fake News Spread, and Social Media Knows it," *Scientific American*, December 1, 2020<br>• Lewandowsky and Kozyreva, "Algorithms, lies, and social media," *Nieman Lab*, April 7, 2022 | Misinformation Design assigned + group selection |
| **Week 8**<br>**3/1** | Opinion, Satire + Conspiracy Theories | • AJ Willingham, "How the Pandemic and Politics Gave Us a Golden Age of Conspiracy Theories," *CNN*, October 3, 2020<br>• Emily Nussbaum, "How Jokes Won the Election," *The New Yorker*, Jan 2017<br>• Garrett, Bond, and Poulsen, "Too Many People Think Satirical News is Real," *The Conversation*, Aug 2019 | |
| **Week 9**<br>**3/8** | Misinformation Design Presentations | | Present Misinformation Design<br><br>Complete "Meme Wars" |
| **Spring Break**<br>**3/15** | **Spring Break – No Class** | | |
| **Week 10**<br>**3/22** | Case study 2: The 2016 Election | • Matt Taibbi, "The End of Facts in the Trump Era," *Rolling Stone*, February 8, 2017<br>• Jeet Heer, "America's First Postmodern President," *The New Republic*, July 8, 2017<br>• Daniel A. Cox and John Halpin, "Conspiracy theories, misinformation, COVID-19, and the 2020 election," *American Enterprise Institute,* October 13, 2020<br>• David Kestenbaum, "Until The Cows Come Home," *This American Life*, November 12, 2021<br>• Guess, Nagler and Tucker, "Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook," *Science,* January 9, 2019 | |

| | Topics/Daily Activities | Readings and Homework<br>* to be completed before the start of class | Deliverable/Due Dates<br>* to be completed before the start of class |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 11**<br>**3/29** | A Healthy Content Consumption Diet + Spotting Fake News | • Paula Span, "Getting Wise to Fake News," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2020<br>• M. Asher Lawson and Hemant Kakkar, "Of Pandemics, Politics, and Personality: The Role of Conscientiousness and Political Ideology in the Sharing of Fake News," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, October 2021 | Misinformation Defense assigned |
| **Week 12**<br>**4/5** | No Class | | |
| **Week 13**<br>**4/12** | Brand Tools for Fighting Misinformation | • Shirin Ghaffary, "Does banning extremists online work? It depends," *Recode*, February 3, 2022<br>• Mike Connery, "Combating Misinformation is Every Brand's Purpose," *Purpose Decoded,* December 17, 2021<br>• Harlan Loeb, "Business Must Combat Fake News," *Edelman,* February 20, 2019<br>• Yakira Young, "Misinformation Kills Brand Favorability, Consumers Are Not Here for it," *AdMonsters,* September 9, 2022 | Final Project assigned |
| **Week 14**<br>**4/19** | War Games X | • Gilad Edelman, "Beware the Never-Ending Disinformation Emergency," *Wired*, March 11, 2022 | Complete "The Chaos Machine"<br><br>Submit Misinformation Defense project |
| **Week 15**<br>**4/26** | Wrap-Up + Looking Into The Future | | Final Project due |
| **FINAL EXAM PERIOD**<br>**Dates: 5/3-5/10** | Summative experience | | |

## Policies and Procedures

### Communication
Students are encouraged to contact the instructor outside of class, as needed to support your academic success, via office hours, email, and/or Slack.

- *Office Hours:* Student meetings are by appointment only. Please schedule time by contacting me directly.

- *Email:* You are also encouraged to email me with questions on any topic you would like to discuss. In general, I will respond to emails within 24 hours or sooner.
- *Blackboard:* Course materials and weekly slides will be posted on Blackboard

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Integrity:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

The School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication. There are no exceptions to the school's policy.

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

### Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

## Support Systems:

*Counseling and Mental Health* - *(213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline* - *988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call*
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* - *(213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call*
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

*Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX)* - *(213) 740-5086*
Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment* - *(213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS)* - *(213) 740-0776*
OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

*USC Campus Support and Intervention* - *(213) 740-0411*
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity, Equity and Inclusion* - *(213) 740-2101*
Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency* - *UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety* - *UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call*
Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Office of the Ombuds* - *(213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)*
A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

*Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice* - *(323) 442-2850 or* otfp@med.usc.edu
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund*
https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards
The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

*Annenberg Student Emergency Aid Fund*
https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards
Awards are distributed to students experiencing unforeseen circumstances and emergencies impacting their ability to pay tuition or cover everyday living expenses. These awards are not intended to cover full-tuition expenses, but rather serve as bridge funding to guarantee students' continued enrollment at USC until other resources, such as scholarships or loans, become available. Students are encouraged to provide as much information in their application, as well as contact their academic advisor directly with questions about additional resources available to them.


## About Your Instructor

My 15-plus year career in marketing and communications has taken me from sports, to technology, and government, both agency and in-house, to earned media, social media, influencer marketing, and more.

I have served as CMO for a City, executed global/integrated campaigns for tech brands like Samsung, Microsoft, Google, and others, and led editorial strategy with the San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League.

Through all that, I've learned the importance of blending a sound strategy with an environment of creative safety, openness and empathy. When together, truly great work emerges.

When I'm not thinking deeply about communications and marketing problems, you're likely to find me watching NBA basketball or eating some kind of burrito.

Read more of my writing at https://www.andylutzky.com/.