

Syllabus INR 6938: Special Topics: Politics of Online Security - Spring 2024

Professor: Dr. Kevin Aslett

Email: kevin.aslett@ucf.edu

Office Hours: Monday 11:00 AM – 1:00 PM in Howard Phillips Hall (HPH) 0302I and [online on Zoom](#) ; Students may schedule other times to meet, but they must reach out to me via email.

COURSE INFORMATION

Course Description:

There are abundant online threats to the welfare of individuals and society. Terrorists use social media to recruit. Authoritarian governments censor free speech, opposition politicians, and suppress potential collective action. Viral disinformation in many forms (text, video, etc.) produced by both foreign and domestic actors threaten democracy and public health. Niche chat rooms are used to radicalize individuals to political extremes and incite violence. Phishing attempts are becoming increasingly effective. This course will explore political science research around online threats to individuals and the policies (imposed by both communication platforms and government institutions) designed to mitigate them.

Course Objectives:

At the end of this course, students will have:

- (1) Gained an understanding of the most pressing challenges for online global communication platforms.
- (2) Built a foundational knowledge of current research in Online Trust and Safety.
- (3) Developed either a draft policy proposal or research proposal.

Required Materials

All required text will be accessible through the UCF library or will be provided by the instructor.

Graded Assignments:

Class Participation (20%)

4 Written assignments (20%)

Literature review (10%)

Final Lightning Talk Presentation (10%)

Final Project (40%)

Class Participation (20%):

Every week, students will receive a participation grade out of 15. To receive full credit, students are expected to read all of the required readings during that week and contribute in one of the following two pathways:

(1) Comment on three of the readings posted in the [discussion section](#) for that week. You must complete each comment by the end of that week (Sunday). Each comment should be 3-4 sentences long and each comment should do one of the following:

- Respond to one of the discussion questions the professor posted.
- Directly respond to another student's comment (Please be respectful).
- Add a question that you would like to ask the authors or pose to the class. Explain why the question is important.
- Highlight an aspect of the reading that you felt was very important and explain why.
- Critique the reading. Maybe add one point that the authors miss or a point that you disagree with. Please be sure to explain this.

(2) Attend and contribute to the discussion during the online class discussion period (1 hour) for that week. During the online class discussion period I will pose questions to the group about the readings and we will discuss, critique, and build on the readings for that week. Each student attending should contribute at least twice during the discussion to receive full participation points for that week. We will decide the day and time for this online discussion period during the first week of class. So, we will not have an online class discussion period during the first week (January 8th-14th). During the first week, everyone will have to answer discussion questions and submit them online. The online class discussion period will begin during the second week.

4 Written assignments (20%):

Students must write 4 one-page single-spaced memos. You can choose any 4 weeks to write a memo on (from Week 2 to Week 14), but the memo must be turned in before that week's readings are assigned. For example, if you chose to write about Week 3 (Metrics and Measurement), then you need to submit your one-page memo by Sunday, January 21st. This memo should accomplish three objectives:

(1) Quickly summarize the readings for that week

(2) Discuss the importance of that topic

(3) Provide some form of original contribution/critical thinking that could be one of the following:

- A criticism of a point made by one of the authors. Be sure to explain yourself clearly.
- An important point that you feel the authors missed or did not spend enough time on.
- A potential solution that you feel could solve issues the authors discuss.
- A proposal for a research project.

Each memo must demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of the readings for that week. A grading rubric for each memo can be found [here](#):

Literature Review (10%): Students must write a literature review on a specific policy area. Each student will choose one of the week's online abuses from Week 5 (Content Moderation) to Week 12 (Authenticity, Identity, and Platform Manipulation) to build a literature review for. Students should cite all of the articles in the syllabus for that week and at least 10 other peer-reviewed sources on your topic of interest that we did not go over in class. You will research this topic and find these sources. The literature review is due on March 31st at midnight, should be between 1500 and 2000 words and should accomplish three different objectives:

- Summarize the literature around this topic area. Both literature discussing the problem and the solutions that currently exist.
- Outline some gaps in the literature, so areas surrounding this topic where more research should be done.

A grading rubric for the literature review can be found [here](#):

5-minute Lightning Talk (10%): Students will submit a 5-minute presentation of their final project at the end of Week 14. This lightning presentation will detail their final presentation. I will post the videos to the discussion board and other students will post comments on these videos. A grading rubric for the lightning presentation can be found [here](#):

Final Project (40%):

There are two potential tracks for the final project. The final project should be between 3000 and 4000 words in length. It is recommended that the literature review and the final project are written on the same topic, but it is not necessary. Each student will choose one of the week's online abuses from Week 5 (Content Moderation) to Week 12 (Authenticity, Identity, and Platform Manipulation) to write one of the following:

(1) Policy Memo: This paper should outline the difficulties with dealing with this area of online abuse/threats, current solutions used in the field and then provide a novel recommendation for how to address this online abuse/threat. It can be a very specific recommendation or general, but

it must show a detailed understanding of online abuse/security threat and a viable solution to solving it. It should answer four different questions: (1) What are the negative consequences of this online abuse? (Why should we care?) ; (2) What are the current policies designed to handle it? ; (3) Why do these policies struggle to address this problem area? ; (4) What is your solution? How would it solve this problem?

(2) Research Proposal: This paper should summarize the research in this area of online abuse/threats, gaps in the literature and then provide a novel research proposal for how to address this gap in the literature. You must show a detailed understanding of research in the online abuse/security threat and a viable research proposal.

A grading rubric for both tracks of the final project can be found here:

Grading Scale

GRADE	PERCENTAGE
A	91.5-100
A-	89.5-91.5
B+	87.5-89.5
B	79.5-87.5
B-	77.5-79.5
C+	75.5-78.5
C	68.5-75.5
C-	66.5-68.5
D+	64.5-66.5
D	57.5-64.5
F	57.5 or less

Readings

Every class period, except for the first day, students will have readings they should consult. They should all be accessible either through links provided by Professor Aslett or by the UCF Libraries. If not, Professor Aslett will provide the reading. All of the content, divided by week, can be found on the [Readings page](#).

Make-Up Policy

If a student has a valid excuse (medical, religious, university activities, etc.), I will allow students a reasonable amount of time to make-up the assignment or exam. Students must notify me before the due date of an assignment or exam to be allowed to make it up.

Students who represent the university in an authorized event or activity (for example, student-athletes) and who are unable to meet a course deadline due to a conflict with that event must provide the instructor with documentation in advance to arrange a make-up. No penalty will be applied. For more information, see the UCF policy at <https://policies.ucf.edu/documents/4-401.pdf>

Statement regarding accommodations for active-duty military students

Students who are deployed active-duty military and/or National Guard personnel and require accommodation should contact their instructors as soon as possible after the semester begins and/or after they receive notification of deployment to make related arrangements.

Campus Safety Statement

Emergencies on campus are rare, but if one should arise during class, everyone needs to work together. Students should be aware of their surroundings and familiar with some basic safety and security concepts.

- In case of an emergency, dial 911 for assistance.
- Every UCF classroom contains an emergency procedure guide posted on a wall near the door. Students should make a note of the guide's physical location and review the online version at <https://centralflorida-prod.modolabs.net/student/safety/index>.
- Students should know the evacuation routes from each of their classrooms and have a plan for finding safety in case of an emergency.
- If there is a medical emergency during class, students may need to access a first-aid kit or AED (Automated External Defibrillator). To learn where those are located, see <https://ehs.ucf.edu/automated-external-defibrillator-aed-locations>.
- To stay informed about emergency situations, students can sign up to receive UCF text alerts by going to www.getrave.com/login/ucf and logging in. On the "My Account" tab, fill out the information, including e-mail address and cell phone number.
- Students with special needs related to emergency situations should speak with their instructors outside of class.
- To learn about how to manage an active-shooter situation on campus or elsewhere, consider viewing this video (<https://youtu.be/NIKYajEx4pk>).

Title IX Statement

Title IX prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual misconduct, sexual violence, sexual harassment, and retaliation. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find resources available to support the victim, including confidential resources and information concerning reporting options at <https://letsbeclear.ucf.edu> and <http://cares.sdes.ucf.edu/>.

For more information on diversity and inclusion, Title IX, accessibility, or UCF's complaint processes contact:

- Title IX – OIE – <http://oie.ucf.edu/> & askanadvocate@ucf.edu
- Disability Accommodation – Student Accessibility Services
- Diversity and Inclusion Training and Events
- UCF Compliance and Ethics Office & complianceandethics@ucf.edu
- Ombuds Office

Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignment
Week 1 Jan. 8 - 14	Introduction to Trust and Safety	Available on Readings page	HW Assignment 1 due on Jan. 11 Participation Week 1 due by Jan. 14
Week 2 Jan. 15 - 21	Government Regulations	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 2 due by Jan. 21
Week 3 Jan. 22 - 28	Metrics and Measurement	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 3 due by Jan. 28
Week 4 Jan. 29 - Feb. 4	Trust & Safety Ecosystem: Multistakeholderism	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 4 due by Feb. 4
Week 5 Feb. 5 - Feb. 11	Content Moderation	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 5 due by Feb. 11
Week 6 Feb. 12 - Feb. 18	Information Environment	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 6 due by Feb. 18
Week 7 Feb. 19 - Feb. 25	Terrorism, Radicalization, and Extremism	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 7 due by Feb. 25
Week 8 Feb. 26 - Mar. 3	Online Harassment	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 8 due by Mar. 3
Week 9 Mar. 4 - Mar. 10	Online Hate Speech	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 9 due by Mar. 10
Week 10 Mar. 11 - Mar. 17	Child and Adult Sexual Exploitation	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 10 due by Mar. 17
Week 11 Mar. 18 - Mar. 24	Suicide, Self-Harm, & Well-Being	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 11 due by Mar. 24
Week 12 Mar. 25 - Mar. 31	Authenticity, Identity, and Platform Manipulation	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 12 due by Mar. 31 Literature Review due on March 31st.
Week 13 Apr. 1 - Apr. 7	Types of Attack Surfaces	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 13 due by Apr. 7

Week 14 Apr. 8 - Apr. 14	Emerging Technologies	Available on Readings page	Participation Week 14 due by Apr. 14
Week 15 Apr. 15 - 21	* Student Presentations *		Student Presentations due on Apr. 21
Final Exam Period Apr. 22 - 30	***** Working on Final Project *****		Participation Week 15 due by Apr. 28 Final Project due on Apr. 28