

**INVISIBLE WARFARE: ONLINE INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND AI
(IAFF 6208-81 / SMPA 6270-83)**

Fall 2026

Bell Hall Room 108

Karl Stoltz

Tuesdays 5.10 to 7.00 p.m.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine the global rise of online foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) in the past decade, as our adversaries take advantage of our freedom of speech and innovation-driven IT environment to spread division and doubt and weaken national security with AI-enhanced disinformation. It will provide an overview of current issues in cybersecurity threats and policy. We will look at the history of state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda, including Russian/Soviet “active measures” and Chinese, Iranian, and terrorist organizations’ information manipulation, to better understand the techniques they use to influence public audiences. This course will survey the wide variety of human-enabled tactics, and artificial intelligence-empowered tools that amplify disinformation and cloak its origins.

The course will include with an evaluation of the best ways that individuals, groups, and nations can detect disinformation, understand its sources, disrupt its effectiveness, and build resilience to mitigate its effects, including the use of AI as a tool for good to fight it. A prior background in computer science, media and public affairs, or government studies is NOT required for this course, but will enhance understanding of the issue.

This will be an interactive class, with regular student participation. The first half of this course is composed primarily of participatory lectures, including expert guest lectures, while the second half will intersperse lectures with short case studies. Homework will largely consist of social media engagement and reading background articles with examples of current disinformation examples. Students will be asked to submit two papers during the course: a short mid-term quiz paper articulating key components of FIMI, focused on multiple countries and regions, and an end-of-course research paper that delves into a specific disinformation challenge theme or nation, identifies the malign actors behind the effort, and recommends creative and innovative responses to respond.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of basic information about disinformation and propaganda;
2. Understand why governments seek to influence the citizens of other countries, and how they do so, and
3. Describe policy approaches to the problem of disinformation, and how to apply those approaches to real world cases.

Students will be able to communicate their knowledge about this subject orally and in writing, to a variety of audiences.

GRADING AND COURSE POLICIES

There will be two written assignments, outlined below in the Course Description.

Extra credit will be earned for those who contribute voluntary content on the course topic to websites, blogs, podcasts and newsletters connected to the Elliot School of International Affairs, the School of Media and Public Affairs, and/or the Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication (IPDGC). This can be in the form of video content, audio content or student-submitted articles. Extra credit will also be earned for voluntary efforts to raise awareness of the issues discussed in class with wider audiences via social media and other means.

Minimum amount of independent, out-of-class learning expected per week: 2-5 hours.

COURSE TEXTS FOR DOWNLOAD OR PURCHASE

All readings are generally available online, free of charge. Where paywalls exist, efforts will be made to share content via workarounds or periodicals available via the Gelman Library or other facilities. Some hyperlinks in this syllabus may expire without warning; students are responsible for alternating the instructor and/or accessing materials through alternative means as needed.

GRADING

Classroom participation/role-playing/quizzes:	30%
Mid-term Paper:	30%
Final Research Paper:	40%

You will be assigned numerical grades for each assignment/examination and awarded a final grade based on the weights noted above:

A	93 or above
A-	90 to 92
B+	87 to 89
B	83 to 86
B-	80 to 82
C+	77 to 79
C	73 to 76
C-	70 to 72
D+	67 to 69
D	63 to 66
D-	60 to 62
F	59 or below

GRADING RUBRIC

An A paper/test response/presentation:

- Clearly understands the most significant aspects of the arguments being made by the lecturer and/or authors of readings
- Advances a persuasive argument distinct from the authors
- Advances additional evidence that supports the thesis statement
- Introduces innovative new solutions and approaches to achieve the goal

B paper/test response/presentation:

- Understands most aspects of the arguments being made by the lecturer and/or authors of readings
- Advances an argument distinct from the authors, although the argument is not fully convincing or fully developed
- Advances evidence that supports the thesis, with some (but not complete) success
- Introduces new ideas that are somewhat relevant, but do not address the prime goal

C paper/test response/presentation:

- Understands some of the arguments being made by the lecturer and authors of readings
- Does not advance an argument distinct from the authors
- Repeats the evidence used by authors and draws the same conclusions as authors. This is a descriptive, rather than argumentative, essay, even if it recapitulates the key arguments of the author
- Introduces new ideas that are not relevant to the topic or goal, or does not introduce any new ideas or independent thinking at all

D or F paper/test response/presentation:

- Is not turned in and/or shows no knowledge of the material studied.
- Does not grasp the most significant aspects of the arguments being made by the lecturer(s) and authors of readings
- Is incomplete, does not make a coherent argument, or does not address the question asked

COURSE CALENDAR

(Additional current reading links will be shared each week via Blackboard, email and in class)

Week One – Tuesday, August 25

Defining “Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference”

Understanding our human vulnerability to disinformation; placing disinformation in context.

Icebreaker class exercise.

READING LIST

- Try the free online games [Harmony Square](#), [Cat Park](#), and/or [Bad News](#)
- [Social Psychology: the Social Animal on Social Media](#), by Ruth Stalker-Firth
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [Mass Communication, Propaganda, and Persuasion](#) (esp. pages 47-91), by Elliot Aronson (1972)

Week Two– Tuesday, September 1

The Technological Enablers of FIMI

Discussion of how FIMI works, how it is amplified, and why it is so effective. Case studies.

READING LIST

- [Fuel on the Fire: Information as a Weapon](#), Karl Stoltz, Foreign Policy Research Institute (March 2025)
- [Lessons from the Information War: Applying Effective Technological Solutions to the Problems of Online Disinformation and Propaganda](#), J.D. Maddox, GWU (2019)
- [The Case for Facts: Preserving Reality Itself](#), by Angie Holan, the Poynter Institute (2025)
- Watch this [CBS interview with Daniel Gardner](#), author of “The Science of Fear”
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [The Science of Fear*](#), Dan Gardner (2008) – avail. at Gelman
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [AI and the Future of Disinformation Campaigns](#) by Katerina Sedova, Christine McNeill, Aurora Johnson, Aditi Joshi, and Ido Wulkan (CSET, 2021)

Week Three – Tuesday, September 8

Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power, and Strategic Communications

Foreign propaganda and disinformation operations in a global context. Case studies.

READING LIST

- [U.S. National Security Strategy](#)
- [Digital Diplomacy’s New Dawn](#) by former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Elizabeth Allen, May 2004, CFR
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [The Lexus and the Olive Tree](#), by Tom Friedman (2009), esp. pages 306-337

Week Four – Tuesday, September 15

Active Measures: Case Studies of Soviet and Russian Info Ops

Classroom discussion, and possible guest lecturer.

READING LIST:

- Watch [Operation InfeKtion: How Russia Perfected the Art of War](#) (YouTube)
- [More Than a Century of Antisemitism](#) by the Global Engagement Center (2024)
- [The Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem](#), GEC (2021)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [Understanding Russian Disinformation and How the Joint Force Can Address It](#), U.S. Army War College Publications (2024)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: [Active Measures: the Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare](#)* by Thomas Rid (2020) – avail. at Gelman or from lecturer

Week Five – Tuesday, September 22

Challenges from the PRC, Iran, and Other State Disinformation Actors

Classroom discussion, and possible guest lecturer. Case studies.

READING LIST:

- [4th annual Threat Report](#), by the European External Action Service, March 2026
- [How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment](#), GEC report (2024)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Six – Tuesday, September 29

Algorithms: How Information Technology Enables Disinformation and Can Help Fight It

Guest lecturers: Hallie Stern and one other TBD.

READING LIST:

- [Cutting the Funding of Disinformation: The Ad-Tech Solution](#) by the Global Disinformation Index (2019)
- [Everything You Need to Know About Section 230](#) by Casey Newton, *the Verge* (2020)
- [Comparative Media Regulation in the United States and Europe](#) by Francis Fukuyama and Andrew Grotto, Cambridge University Press (2020)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA: watch the films [The Great Hack](#) and/or [The Social Dilemma](#)

Week Seven – Tuesday, October 6

Mid-Term Exam and Review of Topics to Date

*We will review what has been covered so far, and hand out the mid-term exam, a short paper assignment. Students will be asked to identify the indications of a specific FIMI campaign, analyze why it might be effective, and suggest the best means to counter it. The mid-term paper must be submitted electronically by the end of the day **on Wednesday, October 14.***

Week Eight – **MID-TERM Break** (No Classes on Tuesday, October 13)

Week Nine – Tuesday, October 20

Deadly Games: Violent Extremist Organizations, State Actors & Information Manipulation

Guest lecturer: Paul Fischer. Graded mid-term papers returned to students.

READING LIST:

- [The Digital Battlefield: How Terrorists Use the Internet and Online Networks for Recruitment and Radicalization](#), by Aaron Zelin, the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy (March 2025)
- [The Most Dangerous Game](#), by Paul Fisher and Karl Stoltz, Deft9 Solutions (May 2025)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Ten – Tuesday, October 27

Disinformation and Elections

Discussion and classroom exercise on using disinformation to influence voter decisions.

READING LIST:

- [Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature](#), by Joshua A. Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barberá, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan (March 2018)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Eleven – Tuesday, November 3

AI, the Entertainment Industry, and the Media

Classroom discussion, and case studies

READING LIST:

- Watch the Q-Anon conspiracy film [Out Of Shadows](#) (available on YouTube)
- [Digital Media Trends: The Future of Movies](#), by Chris Arkenberg, David Cutbill, Jeff Loucks and Kevin Westcott (2021)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Twelve – Tuesday, November 10

The Role of the U.S. Government and the Private Sector

Classroom discussion and in-class exercises.

READING LIST:

- [Fighting Disinformation Online: A Database of Web Tools](#), Rand Corporation, 2019-10
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Thirteen – Tuesday, November 17

Memecraft: What Each Citizen Can Do to Resist FIMI

Guest lecturer: Denis Yudin; classroom discussions. review of final paper topics.

READING LIST:

- [Toward a Whole-of-Society Framework for Countering Disinformation](#) by J.D. Maddox, Casi Gentzel and Adela Levis (2021)
- OPTIONAL EXTRA READING: TBD

Week Fourteen – Tuesday, November 24

What Each Nation Can Do to Resist FIMI

Classroom discussion; possible guest lecturer

READING LIST:

- [EUvsDisinfo | Detecting, analysing, and raising awareness about disinformation](#)

Week Fifteen – Tuesday, December 1

Final Review and Final Paper Assignments

Review of the semester's topics, discussion of final assignments

Week Sixteen – Tuesday December 8

Final Papers

No class this week; free time to work on final papers (office hours extended)

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

*Your final paper is due by **COB on Monday, December 14**; earlier submissions are welcome.*

You will be asked to write a paper of 1500-2000 words on a topic previously discussed with and approved by the instructor. The paper should examine one or more FIMI issues in-depth, based on thorough research. Your topic may focus on a specific country or region, or a specific FIMI theme or subject matter, but it should achieve three goals: (A) clearly identify an information manipulation effort and those responsible, (B) analyze the impact of the FIMI campaign and its potential consequences; and (C) recommend creative ways to respond to counter its impact.

CLASS ATTENDANCE

You are expected to attend class regularly. If you are ill, please stay home, but do notify the instructor in advance either by email (karlestoltz@gmail.com) or phone (703-380-3353). Please also remember to check GW campus advisories on snowy mornings to find out if the university has canceled classes or will be opening late. <http://www.campusadvisories.gwu.edu/>

University policies

Academic Integrity Code

Academic integrity is an essential part of the educational process, and all members of the GW community take these matters very seriously. As the instructor of record for this course, my role is to provide clear expectations and uphold them in all assessments. Violations of academic integrity occur when students fail to cite research sources properly, engage in unauthorized collaboration, falsify data, and otherwise violate the [Code of Academic Integrity](#). If you have any questions about whether particular academic practices or resources are permitted, you should ask me for clarification. If you are reported for an academic integrity violation, you should contact Conflict Education and Student Accountability (CESA), formerly known as Student Rights and Responsibilities (SRR), to learn more about your rights and options in the process. Consequences can range from failure of assignment to expulsion from the University and may include a transcript notation. For more information, refer to the [CESA website](#) at or contact CESA by email cesa@gwu.edu or phone 202-994-6757.

University policy on observance of religious holidays

Students must notify faculty during the first week of the semester in which they are enrolled in the course, or as early as possible, but no later than three weeks prior to the absence, of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance. If the holiday falls within the first three weeks of class, the student must inform faculty in the first week of the semester. For details and policy, see provost.gwu.edu/policies-procedures-and-guidelines.

Use of Electronic Course Materials and Class Recordings

Students are encouraged to use electronic course materials, including recorded class sessions, for private personal use in connection with their academic program of study. Electronic course materials and recorded class sessions should not be shared or used for non-course related purposes, unless express permission has been granted by the instructor. Students who impermissibly share any electronic course materials are subject to discipline under the Student Code of Conduct. Contact me if you have questions regarding what constitutes permissible or impermissible use of electronic course materials and/or recorded class sessions. Contact Disability Support Services at disabilitysupport.gwu.edu if you have questions or need assistance in accessing electronic course materials.

Academic support

Academic Commons is the central location for academic support resources for GW students. To schedule a peer tutoring session for a variety of courses visit go.gwu.edu/tutoring. Visit academiccommons.gwu.edu for study skills tips, finding help with research, and connecting with other campus resources. For questions email academiccommons@gwu.edu.

GW Writing Center

GW Writing Center cultivates confident writers in the University community by facilitating collaborative, critical, and inclusive conversations at all stages of the writing process. Working alongside peer mentors, writers develop strategies to write independently in academic and public settings. Appointments can be booked online at gwu.mywconline.

Support for students in and outside the classroom

Disability Support Services (DSS) 202-994-8250

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact Disability Support Services at disabilitysupport.gwu.edu to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations.

Student Health Center 202-994-5300, 24/7

The Student Health Center (SHC) offers medical, counseling/psychological, and psychiatric services to GW students. More information about the SHC is available at healthcenter.gwu.edu. Students experiencing a medical or mental health emergency on campus should contact GW Emergency Services at 202-994-6111, or off campus at 911.

GW Campus Emergency Information

GW Emergency Services: 202-994-6111

For situation-specific instructions, refer to [GW's Emergency Procedures guide](#).

GW Alert

GW Alert is an emergency notification system that sends alerts to the GW community. GW requests students, faculty, and staff maintain current contact information by logging on to alert.gwu.edu. Alerts are sent via email, text, social media, and other means, including the Guardian app. The Guardian app is a safety app that allows you to communicate quickly with GW Emergency Services, 911, and other resources. Learn more at safety.gwu.edu.

Protective Actions

GW prescribes four protective actions that can be issued by university officials depending on the type of emergency. All GW community members are expected to follow directions according to the specified protective action. The protective actions are Shelter, Evacuate, Secure, and Lockdown (details below). Learn more at safety.gwu.edu/gw-standard-emergency-statuses.

Shelter

- Protection from a specific hazard
- The hazard could be a tornado, earthquake, hazardous material spill, or other environmental emergency.
- Specific safety guidance will be shared on a case-by-case basis.

Action:

- Follow safety guidance for the hazard.

Evacuate

- Need to move people from one location to another.
- Students and staff should be prepared to follow specific instructions given by first responders and University officials.

Action:

- Evacuate to a designated location.
- Leave belongings behind.
- Follow additional instructions from first responders.

Secure

- Threat or hazard outside of buildings or around campus.
- Increased security, secured building perimeter, increased situational awareness, and restricted access to entry doors.

Action:

- Go inside and stay inside.
- Activities inside may continue.

Lockdown

- Threat or hazard with the potential to impact individuals inside buildings.
- Room-based protocol that requires locking interior doors, turning off lights, and staying out of sight of corridor window.

Action:

- Locks, lights, out of sight
 - Consider Run, Hide, Fight
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- **Classroom emergency lockdown buttons**
Some classrooms have been equipped with classroom emergency lockdown buttons. If the button is pushed, GWorld Card access to the room will be disabled, and GW Dispatch will be alerted. The door must be manually closed if it is not closed when the button is pushed. Anyone in the classroom will be able to exit, but no one will be able to get in.