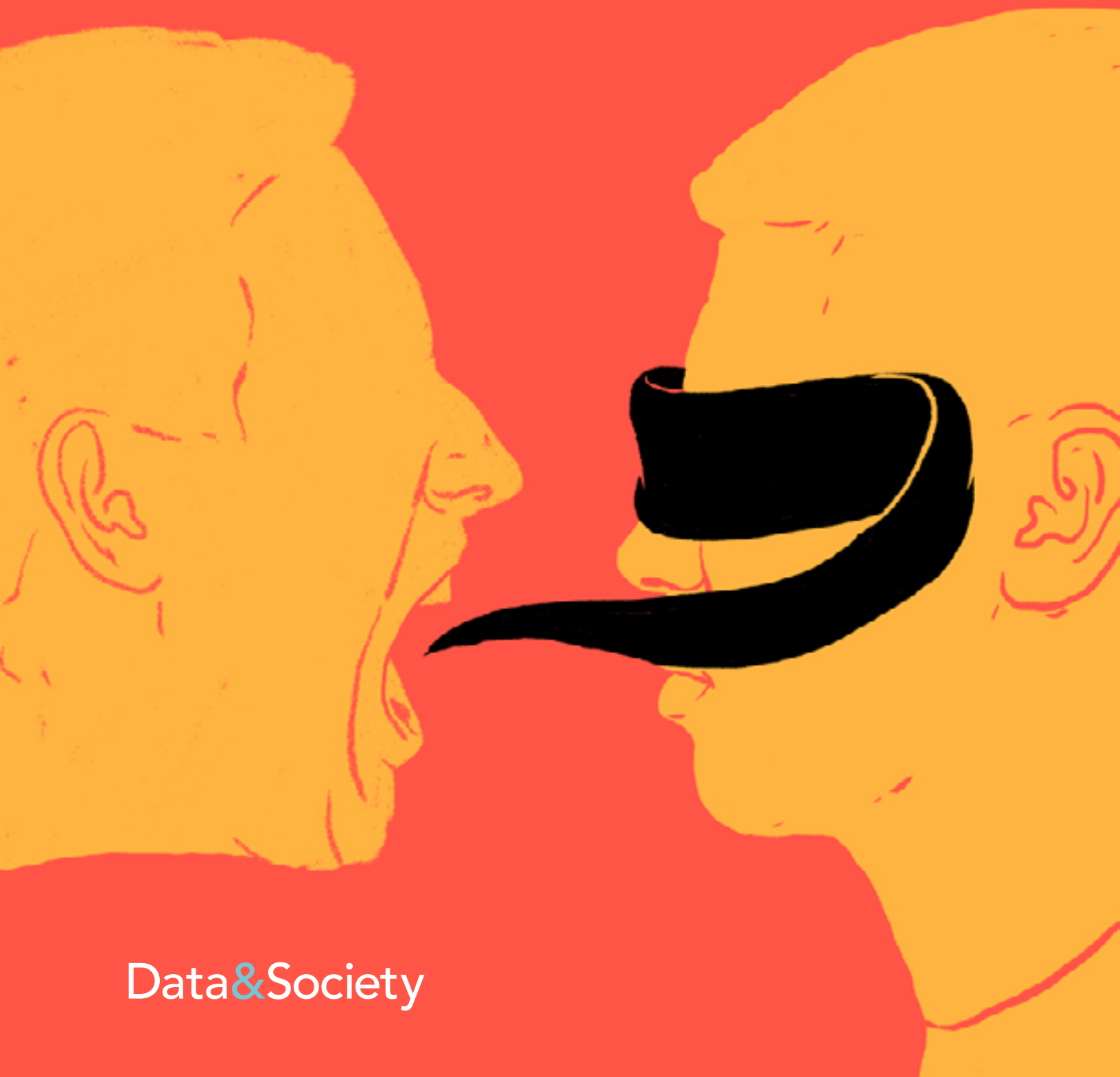# Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online

Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis

SYLLABUS

Data&Society

TEACHING MEDIA MANIPULATION

The [media manipulation whitepaper](#) can be used in undergraduate or graduate classes in communication, media studies, political science, and sociology, among others. We've provided some suggestions for incorporating it into the classroom. Please let us know if you use it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do the subcultural groups referenced in this report manipulate the media?

- Why is the media vulnerable to this manipulation?

- How does social media tie into this ecosystem? To what extent are Facebook, Twitter, and other information intermediaries responsible for enabling media manipulation? Can we use technical mechanisms to cut down on media manipulation?

- How does gender tie into the processes described in this document? Why is it important in understanding media manipulation?

- Many people are worried about "fake news." What do we mean by fake news? According to this report, what role does "fake news" play?

OTHER CASE STUDIES

French Election

Mezzofiore, Gianluca. "How Pro-Trump trolls spread fake news from 4chan to influence French elections." Mashable, May 4, 2017. [http://mashable. com/2017/05/04/pro-trump-fake-news-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-pen/](http://mashable.com/2017/05/04/pro-trump-fake-news-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-pen/)

Brexit

Jackson, Daniel, Einar Thorsen, and Dominic Wring. EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign. The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University, Poole, England, 2016. http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/
(Note: this is an enormous report. See Section 7 on social media in particular.)

SyriaHoax

Digital Forensics Research Lab. "How the alt-right brought #Syriahoax to America." Medium, April 7, 2017. https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-the-alt-right-brought-syriahoax-to-america-47745118d1c9

ASSIGNMENTS

THE REALITY OF ~~MEME MAGIC~~

In the report, the authors explain that there are different perspectives on the role of alt-right memes in the 2016 election. The following two articles provide examples of contrasting perspectives on the relationship between 4chan/8chan, memes, and the Trump victory.

> Beran, Dale. "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump." Medium.com, February 14, 2017. https://medium.com/DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb

> Phillips, Whitney, Jessica Beyer, and Gabriella Coleman. "Trolling Scholars Debunk the Idea That the Alt-Right's Shitposters Have Magic Powers." Motherboard, March 22, 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/trolling-scholars-debunk-the-idea-that-the-alt-rights-trolls-have-magic-powers

> ***After reading each article, which do you believe is more persuasive? Which do you agree with? Write a response paper arguing for or against the statement, "alt-right memes were essential to electing Donald Trump."***

PARTISAN NEWS CONSUMPTION

Reading:
> Benkler, Yochai, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman. "Study: Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda." Columbia Journalism Review, March 3, 2017. https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php

According to the Pew Research Center, 20% of Americans get news from newspapers; 38% online; 25% from radio, and 57% from television. However, a recent Knight Foundation study found that young people get news from a wide variety of sources, including social media, messaging apps, friends and family, and live video.

> ***Where do you get your news from? For 24 hours, keep track of all the news items you click on, skim, read, or otherwise engage with, and fill out the following worksheet:***

NEWS CONSUMPTION WORKSHEET (EXAMPLE)

News Headline (or equivalent)	Link (if applicable)	Source
Obama Warned Trump on Flynn	None	CNN (Cable)
Donald Trump Embraces another Despot	None, read in print	The New York Times (print newspaper)
Boston doctors murdered in their apartment	None	1010 WINS (radio)
Trayvon Martin would have graduated college this year — so a Florida university is giving him an honorary degree	https://www.facebook.com/NowThisNews/videos/1433315146758605/	NowThis news (Facebook video)
Philippines' Duterte Refuses to Confirm White House Invite Because He Is 'Tied Up'	http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2017/05/01/philippines-duterte-says-may-busy-visit-white-house/	Breitbart News (website)
Macron won	None	Text message from friend

NEWS CONSUMPTION WORKSHEET

News Headline (or equivalent)	Link (if applicable)	Source

EXERCISE 1:

Pick two of your sources. Evaluate each using the [University of California, Berkeley's guide to "Evaluating Resources"](). Answer each of the following questions:

1. [Authority]() - Who is the author? What is their point of view?

2. [Purpose]() - Why was the source created? Who is the intended audience?

3. [Publication & format]() - Where was it published? In what medium?

4. [Relevance]() - How is it relevant to your research? What is its scope?

5. [Date of publication]() - When was it written? Has it been updated?

6. [Documentation]() - Did they cite their sources? Who did they cite?

Overall, how credible is each source? Do you believe the source to be "biased"? Is the source's bias similar to or different from your own political beliefs?

EXERCISE 2:

Write an essay in which you engage with the following questions:

- Go through your worksheet and count up the types of sources. Where are you most likely to get news: television, social media, newspapers?
- How does the source affect the type of information you are exposed to? What type of information is each source type best equipped to deal with?
- How did you define news? Did you include celebrity news, sports news, gossip about your friends? Why or why not?
- How do you find news? Do you share news? When and why?
- How do you decide what news to trust?
- How much of the news you consumed is similar to your own political beliefs? How much is different?

REDPILLING THE NORMIES

Create a visual meme that conveys a political point of view. You can build on a pre-existing meme or try creating one from scratch. Post it on different social media sites. Does it get traction? Do people pay attention? Try different variations; are some more successful than others? Are some messages "stickier"? Write an essay analyzing your experience and reflecting on the use of memes for political messaging.

Tools:
- [Make a Meme](#) (templates, tools)
- [Know Your Meme](#) (meme library)
- [Meme Generator](#) (templates)

FURTHER READING

THE ALT-RIGHT

Lyons, Matthew N. "Ctrl-Alt-Delete: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right." Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, January 20, 2017. http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/01/20/ctrl-alt-delete-report-on-the-alternative-right/.

Southern Poverty Law Center. "Alternative Right." https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alternative-right.

FAKE NEWS

Wardle, Claire. "Fake News. It's Complicated." First Draft News, February 16, 2017. https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79.

Caplan, Robyn. "How Do You Deal with a Problem Like 'Fake News?'" Data & Society: Points, January 5, 2017. https://points.datasociety.net/how-do-you-deal-with-a-problem-like-fake-news-80f9987988a9#.n7d401b3m.

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Holiday, Ryan. Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator. New York: Penguin, 2012.

McCombs, Maxwell E. and Donald Shaw. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." The Public Opinion Quarterly 36, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 176-87.

MEMES

Shifman, Limor. Memes in Digital Culture. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013.

Milner, Ryan M. The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.

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Milner, Ryan M. "Hacking the social: Internet memes, identity antagonism, and the logic of lulz." The Fibreculture Journal, 22 (2014). Available at http://twentytwo.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-156-hacking-the-social-internet-memes-identity-antagonism-and-the-logic-of-lulz/.

Phillips, Whitney. "The House That Fox Built: Anonymous, Spectacle, and Cycles of Amplification." Television & New Media 14, no. 6 (2013): 494–509.

Phillips, Whitney and Ryan M. Milner. The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online. London: Polity, 2017.

THE VULNERABILITY OF NEWS MEDIA

Crain, Matthew. "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership in the United States: A Public Interest Perspective." International Journal of Communication 3 (January 2009). http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/381.

Chu, Hyon. "Clickbait, the Attention Economy, and the End of Journalism." Medium, November 19, 2016. https://medium.com/@hyonschu/clickbait-the-attention-economy-and-the-end-of-journalism-c4f16d2c447d.