
Hate Online

Teacher Version

Sippo Rossi and Irfan Kanat

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Hate Online: How People Deceive Others and Promote Hate Online

Synopsis

In the lecture video, we covered how different individuals and organizations want to mislead others online for financial gain or to support political interests. The in-class assignment will focus on hate speech and misinformation, which is an urgent threat to our society and has proven to be a threat to not only far away countries but also to stable democracies in Europe.

Audience and Teaching Objectives

The target audience of this case is high school students and young adults, but the key points are relevant to all people who use the internet and particularly those who use social networking sites.

The case is meant to teach the audience about how people, organizations and governments try to manipulate and control public opinions by promoting certain ideologies with various methods such as large numbers of coordinated social media accounts and by inserting misinformation and fake news to discussions in social media.

This topic is discussed so that students can understand that they should be critical of what they see online and rigorously check for sources. This should also help students think of how easy it is to pretend to be somebody else online or to make it seem like some opinion has wide support even if in reality it is only supported by few active actors.

Suggested Teaching Format

We recommend the following approach to teaching this topic. First, the students are given an introduction to the topic with a video and or a lecture by the teacher and then are given a chance to read the first article and discuss it with peers as well as the teacher. The students should be encouraged to actively participate in discussions and talk of their own thoughts on the ethical issues regarding the case. After that they should read the second and third article and this should be again followed by in class discussions.

The Case

In this in-class activity we will discuss three articles that demonstrate how hate is spread online and its effects. Please read the articles only after finishing the preceeding section's in class discussion.

Background Part 1: Myanmar

Facebook is one of the most widely used social networking sites in the world with over 2.5 billion accounts created and 1.8 billion active users. However, the platform has been struggling to moderate the content that is being distributed on the website. Perhaps some of the most disturbing examples of how a social media site can be misused comes from Myanmar, where it has been used as a tool to increase hate towards a minority and coordinate attacks against them.

Interestingly, in many countries in south-eastern Asia, Facebook has played an active role in being the primary way to access the internet and even synonymous to it due to deals made with mobile phone providers and telecom companies. This has made the social networking site the primary source of information for many, which is not a great thing when combined with a lack of moderation by the platform and governments that are willing to spread misinformation to the population.

Reading Piece 1:

Please read the following New York times article titled “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar’s Military” from 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

Topics

- Misinformation and fake news
- Fake accounts

Learnings

- Be critical of information on social media
- Check for sources when people claim things online

Discussion Questions

1. Have the students witnessed misinformation on social media?
2. Why do people fall for fabricated lies?
3. Could such a situation happen in Europe or Denmark?

Background Part 2: Russian Trolls

If the first example seemed like something too distant, then the next example is going to be from a country that is closer. The Russian government backed Internet Research Agency has become famous for spreading misinformation and fake news in the West to support political movements that promotes

Russian interests. Although the most famous examples are from the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, the IRA has been involved in European political discussions and has been seen supporting astroturfing campaigns around topics such as anti-EU and anti-immigration.

Reading Piece 2:

Please read the following article “Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace” from the New York Times which was published in 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-troll-factory.html>

Topics

- Trolling
- Online propaganda

Learnings

- Beware of content

Discussion Questions

1. Has anyone witnessed suspicious posts or accounts online around political discussions?
2. Do the students believe that Denmark’s politics are influenced by foreign actors?
3. Do the students believe Danish political parties are also involved in promoting their views with fake accounts?
4. What ethical risks do they see in using fake accounts to promote topics even if the content is something that the students support?

Background Part 3: Germany

Echo chambers are one of the issues in social media which may result in polarization of topics and peoples’ opinions. An echo chamber is formed both intentionally by social media users that are following only accounts and pages that align with their opinions and unintentionally when the algorithm that guides what content people see on social media starts showing only material that aligns with the user’s world view. As a result, the person stuck in an echo chamber interacts only one side of a discussion and often starts seeing increasingly extreme content, as radical posts gather typically more likes on social media and thus gets shared more.

The last example is about the effects of echo chambers in Denmark’s neighboring country Germany, which shows that even highly educated populations with typically good media literacy skills may suffer from exposure to radical content on social media.

Reading Piece 3:

Please read the following article from the Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/facebook-violence-germany/569608/>

Topics

- Hate speech
- Echo chambers

Learnings

- Don't settle for evidence supporting issues you are fond of
- Search for evidence for AND against any point of view

Discussion Questions

1. Could something like this happen in Denmark?
2. Do the students believe online discussions can lead to violence in the real world in Denmark?
3. Have the students seen hate speech on foreigners and or refugees?



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