

Media in the Era of Disinformation (in Estonian “Meedia infokorratuse ajastul”)

Institute: ühiskonnateaduste instituut (SVUH)/ Institute of Social Studies

Credits (1 ECT = 26 hours): 6 ECTs

Duration: 1 semester, fall 2025

Grading: pass/fail (75 out of 100%), the max points is 130, so your target is 96 points to pass. It can be subject to change as the student who gets the most points will set the point score of 100%. 6 ECTs mean 156 hours of work, we have planned this course to take 145 hours (give or take 10 hours).

Where? Web-based learning platform: moodle.ut.ee as our "home base." Webinars/workshops take place through Zoom. You will need a faster internet connection (wired if possible, not Wi-Fi), headphones or speakers to listen to audio, a microphone to talk to, and a webcam to stream your video. Using video during classes is mandatory for this class. If you do not need to make a presentation or ask a question, turn off/mute your microphone to avoid echo and noise.

When? On Mondays, from 16.15-17.45

Who? You :) + a team of academics (and practitioners). All general questions to Maria Murumaa-Mengel (maria.murumaa@ut.ee), our course assistants are Anna Danielyan (anna.danielyan@ut.ee), Anna-Liisa Sootalu (anna-liisa.sootalu@ut.ee), and Anastasia Isabella Poole (anastasia.isabella.poole@ut.ee), and they will handle most independent tasks, consult you on your final group task, and are a part of the final presentations! Yes, they are THAT amazing.

Why? In order to act as responsible, safe, and engaged citizens in the networked publics, individuals need to build digital resilience, data agency, and consistently develop their media and digital literacy skills. This course is dedicated to developing students' digital and media agency so as to be able to make use of the various affordances of the digital mediatized life, as well as to mitigate potential risks that technology-saturated societies uphold. The course has a special emphasis on the work and skills of contemporary journalism, but is relevant for most professions that have to constantly update their digital/media and information literacy competencies - accessing information, analyzing it, creating one's own message, reflecting on one's consumption, and being socially responsible. The course will be led by scholars and lecturers from the fields of journalism, media studies, and communication, but will also engage empirical examples, scholars, and practitioners from different fields (e.g., law, linguistics, semiotics) in order to provide a nuanced overview of the field, current problems, and possible solutions.

The course can be categorized into 4 grand topics:

1. general media framework
2. info disorders
3. the flawed human brain
4. journalistic work practices

After completing the course, the student:

- Is familiar with more common theories and everyday concepts of information society and knows how to recognize and analyze (the dominant signs of) information disorders,
- has an overview of the work processes, roles, and professional demands of journalists in contemporary media systems,
- understands the potential effects of information disorder - on micro, meso, and macro levels,
- Is familiar with the vocabulary on related topics, is able to discuss and critically analyze some of the contemporary issues of the information society and mediatization processes,
- has the skills to independently seek additional information related to the information society concepts,
- Is able to use at least three different methods from "data journalism," understands their uses in different contexts,

- can use various e-learning opportunities and is reflexive about the experience, has used e-learning platforms for cooperation and group work,
- is able to analyze and (to a certain extent) create media content that has journalistic value,
- can find, develop, and use study materials for various stakeholders and target groups within the framework of media/information/digital literacies.

General notes and rules:

- Please do not send Google Docs links as your homework, as it is hard to determine when you have finished working on the file.
- If you hand in your homework later than the deadline, point(s) will be deducted.
- Please refrain from using LLMs (ChatGPT, Copilot, etc) unless the instruction states otherwise. Our goal here is not to practice prompt-writing and master the magnificent skills of copy-paste; rather, we want you to think for yourselves, exercise that beautiful brain of yours! Do not go gently into that good night (yup, referencing Dylan Thomas here) and voluntarily deskill yourself.

The initial outline of the course and coursework:

Date, week	Topic, lecturer	Assignments right before/after that meeting	Points
01.09, week 1	Hello and welcome, course overview. Warm-up. Resilience. MIL (media and information literacy). Maria Murumaa-Mengel.	Before: read the syllabus!	
08.09, week 2	Why media play an integral role in information disorders? Contemporary information society and (deep) mediatization: ubiquitous, invasive, and invisible media and ICT. Maria Murumaa-Mengel.	Before: 1st prep-task (active/passive media use) After: 1st closure-task (resilience)	3p 3p

15.09, week 3	Media logic and social media logic. Influencer creep. Maria Murumaa-Mengel	Before: 2nd prep-task (media logic) After: 2nd closure-task (social media logic)	3p 3p
22.09, week 4	Independent viewing: Disinformation, misinformation, malinformation: terminological confusion. Latest developments in academic and the general public's terminology. Maria Murumaa-Mengel.	Before: 3rd prep-task (terminology) After: 3rd closure-task (countermeasures)	3p 3p
29.09 week 5	Seminar on dis/mis/malinfo. Maria Murumaa-Mengel Additional face-to-face seminar on "fixing" social media on 1st of October (voluntary)	NO PREP-TASK NO CLOSURE-TASK	
06.10, week 6	Conspiracy theories in social media, ConspiTok. Guest: Gretel Juhansoo	Before 4th prep task (conspiracy scene) After: 4th closure-task (looking back)	3p 3p
13.10, week 7	AI's effect on the spreading of mis/disinformation. Maria Murumaa-Mengel	Before: 5th prep-task: Lie! Deceive! After: 5th closure-task: Know your ABCs!	3p 3p
20.10, week 8	Independent work, AKA choose your own adventure from pre-recorded/prepared materials:		5p

	A- Case study about using a specific advanced fact-checking tool B- Vulnerabilities of societies C- MIL online course. IREX. D- microinterventions		
27.10, week 9	Media and cognitive biases. Representations. Stereotypes. Maria Murumaa-Mengel.	Before: 6th prep-task (media bias) After: 6th closure-task (media manipulation)	3p 3p
03.11, week 10	Propaganda techniques in old and new media. Maria Murumaa-Mengel + <i>Luise Gisa Domina</i>	Before: 7th prep-task (contemporary) After: 7th closure-task (history)	3p 3p
10.11, week 11	Mapping the techniques of social media influence operations, dark/alternative influence networks: sealioning, coordinated inauthentic behavior, malign creativity, trolling, etc. Maria Murumaa-Mengel	Before: 8th prep-task (screenshot the horrible) After: 8th closure-task (creative task)	3p 3p
17.11, week 12	Contemporary work practices of journalists. Journalism in the age of disinformation. Skill gaps and perceived deficiencies. <i>Signe Ivask</i> .	Before: 9th prep-task (journalists) After: 9th closure-task (online vs paper)	3p 3p

24.11, week 13	Contemporary investigative journalistic practices and the importance of skills needed to understand and work on various databases. Social media in journalistic work. Martin Laine	NO PREP-TASK NO CLOSURE-TASK	
08.12, week 15	Data analytics in journalism, data journalists. Riin Aljas.	Before: 10h prep-task (case analysis) After: 10th closure-task (my case)	3p 3p
12.01, week 20	Course wrap-up, reflections, best work. Maria Murumaa-Mengel	10.01.2026 - final project report 15.01.2026 - study diary	50p 15p

What do you need to do in order to pass this class?

1. Most topics have some independent prep-work that gives 3 points each week (10 tasks). All tasks will be available in Moodle. The specific tasks help students to prepare for the specific topic, giving them the base level knowledge that seminars and lectures will build upon. Max 2-3 hours per week. Total of 30 hours of work. Total of 30 points.
2. Most topics have a closure-task (3p each) that anchors and strengthens the knowledge/skills acquired (10 tasks). All tasks will be available in Moodle. Max 2-3 hours per week. Total of 30 hours of work. Total of 30 points.
3. Each week's lecture/seminar/workshop. Show up, participate, and enjoy :) I will not check participation; this is entirely up to you, as university-level studies rely upon students' inner motivation. Course feedback is mostly very positive, with the exception of involvement in class. Perceived low involvement is probably the result of lax rules of participation. So be aware - if you yourself don't make an effort, you will probably leave with a feeling of "I could have done more to take the max out of this course!". Total of 32 hours of work.

4. The students are asked to keep an informal study diary (or a study portfolio) throughout the course. The tool helps develop reflexivity and deeper learning over a longer period of time. Entries should be a minimum of 200 words per entry, visuals can be used as well. Max points 15. Total of 8 hours of work.

5. Independent work on week 8 (5p) - choose one topic and do the related task. Total of 7 hours of work.

6. As a final project - in groups of 4-6: design (and carry out for extra points and eternal glory) a mini-intervention that would increase people's media/information/digital literacies in a novel way that is fitting to the attention economy and information disorders. Create order from chaos :) Max 50p. Total of 40 hours of work. Group consultations with Maria Murumaa-Mengel will be available upon request.

No need to read this - old tasks we have used in previous years, good to know and perhaps use again some other day:

1. from Maia's mis/dis/malinfo

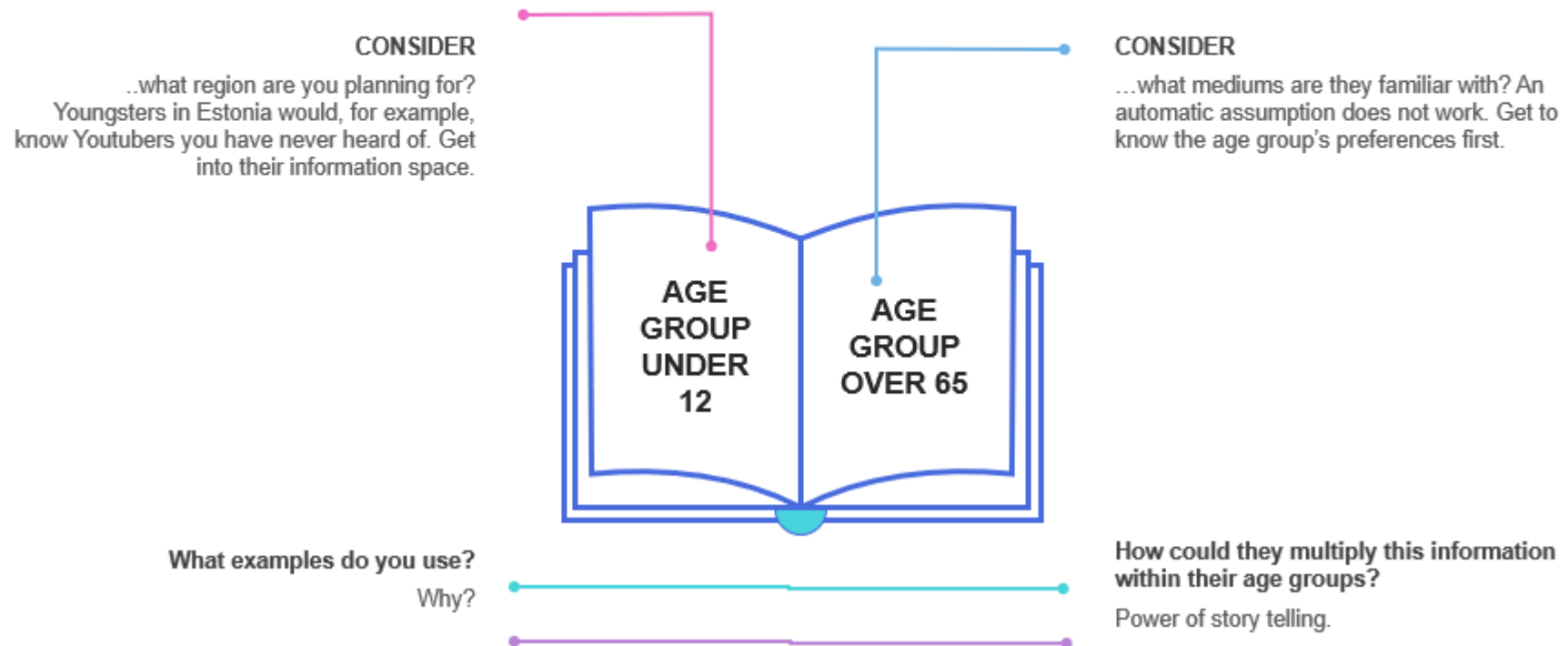
Your closure tasks - as new masters of information disorder related terminology - will be passing on the knowledge. Hopefully IRL too, but for now - let's work on strategy.

Our session today was with people from similar cultural spaces: we could understand eachother's references, knew the news outlets and politicians mentioned, but what happens when that reference based is shaken up a bit?

Your mission: explaining the four terms we dived into today (see the end of slides of that meet) to your chosen age group. Either under 12-year olds or over 65-year olds. I want you to think, develop a strategy and explain said strategy using wisdom, preferably acquired in today's session.

There is no limit on your creativity: let it be an audio clip, written form, visual aid or something else, as long as it is accompanied by argumentation on why you chose this strategy and explains our 4 main terms (information disorder, misinformation, disinformation, mal-information). Think of it as a little warm-up for your big group project. :)

CLOSURE TASK



For **max points**, also include the explanation on how to explain, why we should not use the term "fake news" to your chosen age group. What is the "so what" - why should they care? So for maximum points, you should have FIVE examples, stories or something of the sort, all age-appropriate and argued.

2. from Andra's platformisation and datafication:

Dataveillance in our lives: what does Facebook know about you?

We are living in an era of platformisation where our lives have become datafied. Facebook is one of the platforms many of us have been using for many years and a platform which has collected tons of data about us along the way. For this preparation task I would like you to take a look at your data/life that Facebook has collected about you and think:

- **What did surprise you the most when you looked at the data file Facebook has about you? (the amount of information FB has? The type of information FB has? The detailed nature of the information it has? etc.)**
- **Please look at the „Ads and businesses section“ – how have you been profiled to the advertisers? What kind of a consumer/target you are based on the data available to FB?**
- **Imagine if all this data that FB has collected about you were actually publicly available on your FB account – how would you feel about it? Would you be OK with it (= I have nothing to hide), or would you dislike the idea? Please explain your thought.**

In order to be able to access all the data Facebook has about you, please take the following steps:

To download a copy of your Facebook data:

Click in the top right of Facebook, then click **Settings**.

In the left column, click **Your Facebook Information**.

Next to **Download Your Information**, click **View**.

To add or remove categories of data from your request, click the boxes on the right side of Facebook.

Select other options, including:

The format of your download request.

The quality of photos, videos and other media.

A specific date range of information. If you don't select a date range, you'll request all the information for the categories you've selected.

Click **Create File** to confirm the download request.

After you've made a download request, it will appear as Pending in the Available Files section of the Download Your Information tool. It may take several hours for Facebook to finish preparing your download request. (i.e. please do not leave this task on a very last minute).

Once we've finished preparing your download request, Facebook will send a notification letting you know when your file is ready.

NB! If you do not have a Facebook account, do a similar process with your Google Account (<https://takeout.google.com/>). If you do not have neither, contact prof. Andra Siibak (andra.siibak@ut.ee)

and

Read Facebook's Community Standards

<https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction/>

And Twitter Rules ...

<https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>

and write a short reflection (up to 500 words) what kind of similarities and differences you can find in these guidelines

3. from Maria Kristiina's privacy and profiling:

Check out this intriguing Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/commentsbycelebs/>

Many of us love celebrities, as evidenced by the number of readers of our local Elu24, Kroonika or the American magazines People or InTouch, and there ain't no shame in that (for the most part). At some point, someone noticed a gap in the market of celebrity following; as they put in their bio, "even celebrities love celebrities", are commenting on each other's social media, and that could make interesting content. Evidently, at last a few million people agree.

So, based on your thoughts looking at this account:

1) Name at least 3 ways you would modify your own social media behaviour if you were under this close of a watch, with people not only specifically looking for your content and reactions to people's posts, they wouldn't have a problem with making wide (and wild?) assumptions and conclusions from them, and creating podcasts to discuss the conclusions. What would happen if you didn't do this?

"I would private my account and not let in people I don't know" is a cop-out answer, and you know it. ;)

Alternatively, if you do not have a social media account yourself, use what you know of social media behaviour, and take a few stabs (it's spooky season, after all) at the questions above. What would an average "I use my account to share things with my friends" person need to do?

2) Are accounts (and connected podcasts) like this an invasion of privacy in any way? Would you FEEL it was, if you were the subject? Argue either for or against, using at least 3 solidly made arguments.

Also, without needing to write anything further for now, take a look at this account as well:
<https://www.instagram.com/influencersinthewild/>

Would your answer to question no 2 change if this was the sort of account you could wind up on? We'll discuss this in class.

4. from Maria's topic of visuals:

Play around with Dall-E, Midjourney or similar tool (machine learning models), meaning programs that generate digital images from natural language descriptions (sometimes referred to as AI-drawings).

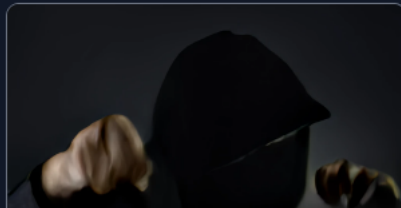
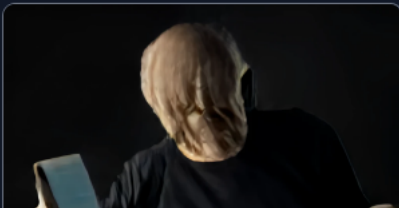
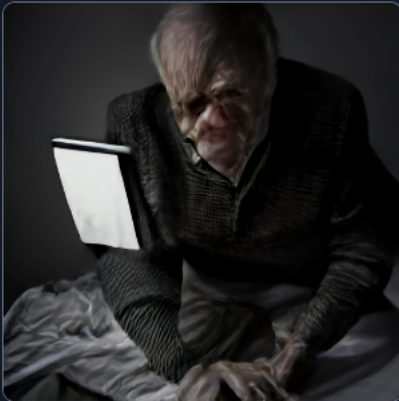
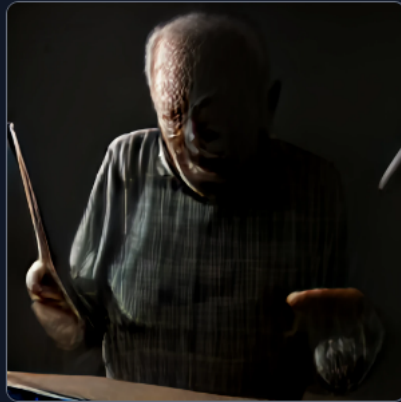
Create four visuals by inserting keywords YOU find fitting to that platforms, settle for one that captures the essence of that platform for you : 1. Facebook 2. Instagram 3. TikTok 4. Twitter

Provide visuals (e.g. screenshots of different versions and the ones that you settle for). Write a short explanation - which keywords did you use, how did you adjust, why these keywords etc. In addition, please write 2 negative and 2 positive things about the wide use of such technological advances.

Example: Dall-E Mini gave me this result after my rather doom-and-gloom text prompts. Take a wild guess what platform had frustrated me on that day

dark painting technology addiction angry older person

 Draw



from 2022 class:

To think in a different mode AAAANNNND earn bonus points (3p each, **can be used once per person!**) - compile a 15-25minute long YouTube or Spotify music playlist that consists of songs that have a connection (in your mind) to this week's topic. Fill out the wiki by **marking down your name in the table** next to the topic you are intrigued to think about musically.

Whenever we have a playlist for the webinar, I will open the Zoom room at 15:45 and will play your choice of soothing/pumped/...music before we begin :)

You can share the playlist by showing up to Zoom at 15:45 or send it to me via email (maria.murumaa@ut.ee). **Be prepared to explain why these songs and what kind of stories do they tell.**