

## **COM 630 Independent Study in Communication Proposal Instructions**

Follow these steps to enroll in COM 630.

1. Meet with the faculty member who has agreed to serve as your faculty advisor on an independent study project. Discuss the parameters of the project, your goals in completing the project, and how the project will be evaluated.
2. Fill out the proposal form in detail using Microsoft Word. The level of detail expected in the form will be commensurate with the number of credit hours you propose. For example, if you propose a three-credit-hour independent study, the level of detail and workload should be equivalent to a graduate-level class you might enroll in normally. The proposal should be thought of as a custom syllabus for such a course. A one-hour independent study would require less explanation and less work.
3. Have your independent study advisor review the proposal form. If they suggest any changes to the form, revise it accordingly until the faculty member agrees that it contains a suitable level of detail.
4. Provide your signature on the form. Ask your independent study advisor to sign the form. Submit the form to the Director of Graduate Programs.
5. Once the DGP approves the independent study, submit the form with all three signatures to the Graduate Services Coordinator. Retain one physical or digital copy for your records and one physical or digital copy for your instructor's records.
6. Submit a request to the GSC to enroll you in the COM 630 section of the course for the appropriate credit hours with the independent study advisor as your instructor.

If you have any questions, consult with the DGP or GSC.

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION**  
**Proposal for COM 630, Independent Study in Communication**

**Student Name:** John A. Doe

**Semester / Year:** Fall 2018                      **Student ID Number:** 123456789

**Independent Study Advisor:** Dr. Ian F. Malcolm

**1. Project Title:**

Disinformed: Visual content analysis of Russian Facebook memes employed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election

**2. Purpose of project:**

The purpose of the proposed project is to apply social science techniques to categorize and analyze visual messages used by Russian elements and intelligence services during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

**3. Detailed description of your independent study**

In early 2018, Facebook released 3,000+ images and memes that had been uploaded on the popular social media platform by Russian intelligence services, partners, and assets during the run up to the 2016 US presidential election. The reported intent of these images was to disseminate disinformation in order to discredit and negatively alter in the mind of target social systems in the United States the perception of the Democratic candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, thereby directly and indirectly assisting the campaign of Donald J. Trump, her Republican opponent. While the effectiveness of the Russian meme campaign and the degree to which it ultimately influenced the outcome of the election remains unclear, this project seeks to categorize and analyze these images by using social science techniques in order to better understand the mechanics of social media disinformation communication campaigns. An exploration of the historical genesis of the Russian campaign is also suggested, one that seeks to determine in what ways it may or may not differ from propaganda in the past and how future campaigns might best be counteracted.

**a) Statement of goals:**

The focus of much of my research has centered on the 2016 US presidential election, which I believe to have been a watershed moment in the history of American politics in general and the history of American political communication in particular. I have specifically argued that diffusion of innovations offers a way to configure the often chaotic and contradictory details surrounding the rise of Trump and the brand of politics known as Trumpism.

Expanding upon this use of the diffusion model as it relates to Trump's election victory, this proposed independent study seeks to examine one important aspect of the social media information/disinformation campaign that may have played a role in shaping or altering the perception of key segments in the American electorate before the election: memes and images directed by Russian intelligence services. The goals of this study therefore include:

1. Building my knowledge of social science techniques relating to quantitative analysis of visual messages and content;
2. Exploring relevant historical propaganda campaigns and techniques and their effectiveness in altering target social systems;
3. Researching relevant studies on the persuasive effects of social media disinformation campaigns (such as those employed domestically and internationally by the Russian government regarding Ukraine, or the Chinese government concerning Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan) and under what conditions persuasion takes place;
4. Using communication and social science techniques to analyze images and memes deployed on social media platforms (specifically Facebook) by the Russian intelligence services and their assets; and
5. Synthesizing this completed study on visual content analysis into an overarching research effort---namely, a thorough analysis of the 2016 Trump campaign for US president viewed through the lens of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003).

**b) Proposed credit hours:**

The project is proposed as a 600-level, 3-credit-hour course.

**c) Work schedule:**

The student proposes a self-directed 12-hour work week, with bi-weekly meetings with the independent study advisor held on Wednesdays and Thursdays, at any time before or after the period of 4 to 6 pm (the hours the student shall be required to teach public speaking courses).

Due dates and key time periods include:

<b>Sept 26</b>	Literature review and development of a codebook reflecting main concepts
<b>Oct 1</b>	Sampling design and protocols involving accessing and saving Facebook posts (screenshot protocols, etc.)
<b>Oct 31</b>	Coding and SPSS input
<b>Nov 1</b>	Draft of the introduction, literature review, and methodology sections
<b>Nov 1-28</b>	Analysis
<b>Dec 11</b>	Final paper due

These dates will be discussed and confirmed in the first meeting between student and advisor in August.

#### 4. Reading List or Bibliography:

*Relevant sources for methodology, visual communication (overall project design, sampling, and measurement of concepts)*

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F. G. (2014). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge.

Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

##### *General Bibliography*

Belousov, A. (2012). Political propaganda in contemporary Russia. *Russian Politics & Law*, 50(3), 56-69.

Bernays, E. L. (1942). The marketing of national policies: A study of war propaganda. *The Journal of Marketing*, 6(3), 236-244.

Haines, J. R. (2015). Russia's Use of Disinformation in the Ukraine Conflict. *Foreign Policy Research Institute: E-Notes*.

Liñán, M. V. (2010). History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43(2), 167-178.

Machiavelli, N., & Wootton, D. (1995). *The Prince*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

Maréchal, N. (2017). Networked authoritarianism and the geopolitics of information: Understanding Russian Internet policy. *Media and Communication*, 5(1), 29-41.

Mayer, J. (2016). *Dark money: How a secretive group of billionaires is trying to buy political control in the US*. London: Scribe Publications.

McLuhan, M. (2015). *Culture is our business*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

McGeehan, T. P. (2018). Countering Russian Disinformation. *Parameters*, 48(1), 49-57.

Mullen, A., & Klaehn, J. (2010). The Herman-Chomsky propaganda model: a critical approach to analyzing mass media behaviour, sociology compass. *Sociology Compass*, 4(4), 215-229.

O'Keefe, D. J. (2002). *Persuasion: Theory and research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patrick, B. A., & Thrall, T. A. (2007). Beyond hegemony: Classical propaganda theory and presidential communication strategy after the invasion of Iraq. *Mass Communication & Society*, 10(1), 95-118.

Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Free Press.

**5. Final form of project:**

The final form of the project will be a 15-20 page research paper offering visual analysis of internet memes employed by Russian intelligence services and assets. This will be suitable for a conference presentation at venues such as ICA, AEJMC, or Southern States Communication Association. It may also be appropriate as a writing sample for PhD applications.

**6. Method of evaluation:**

The project will be evaluated for quality (30%) and quantity (30%) of research, analytical rigor (20%), and writing quality (20%).

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***I have discussed this proposal with my Independent Study Advisor. I understand and agree to the requirements of this project and to the number of hours that I am to receive upon its completion. I understand that this proposal is subject to approval by my Independent Study Advisor and the Director of the Graduate Program.***

**Student Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**COM 630 Advisor Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Dir. of Grad Program Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_