Course Syllabus:

Digital investigations for journalists: How to follow the digital trail of people and entities

Craig Silverman, BuzzFeed News

Brandy Zadrozny, NBC News

Jane Lytvynenko, BuzzFeed News

Johanna Wild, Bellingcat

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Introduction

Digital services and products touch nearly every aspect of our lives. They're core to business, government, and social interactions, which means they're essential elements of any investigation. Journalists need to know how to gather, monitor, analyze and make sense of the digital trail and presence of any person or entity.

Goals

In this course, you will learn how to investigate key digital assets including social media profiles, websites, and images, and how to bring all of these elements together to make connections and generate insights for your reporting.

Objectives

Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Analyze social media accounts on Facebook and other platforms
- Determine the ownership of a website and analyze its content and connections
- Use tools to search and monitor content on Twitter and Facebook
- Analyze the origin of an image
- Connect these assets together to identify and expose networks
- Evaluate the collected information to determine the people or entities behind it

Tools/Applications Required

This requires you to have access to an Internet connection, the Chrome web browser, and to have your own Facebook and Twitter accounts. Please also download TweetDeck, and install the free WeVerify, CrowdTangle, and Wayback Machine Chrome extensions. (If you live in a country that doesn't allow access to Google Chrome, you can use the Firefox web browser. It offers a version of the Fake news debunker plugin. You can also use the web version of the Wayback Machine, though unfortunately there isn't a Firefox version of the CrowdTangle extension. Access to Twitter and Facebook is essential for this course.)

How the course works

First of all, note that this is an asynchronous course. That means there are no live events scheduled at specific times. You can log in to the course and complete activities throughout the week at your own pace, at the times and on the days that are most convenient for you.

Despite its asynchronous nature, there are still structures in place for the duration of the course. The material is organized into four weekly modules. Each module will be taught by one of the course instructors (Craig Silverman, Brandy Zadrozny, Jane Lytvynenko, and Johanna Wild) and will cover a different topic through videos, presentations, readings and discussion forums. There will be a quiz each week to test the knowledge you've gained through the course materials. The weekly quizzes, and weekly participation in the discussion forums, are the basic requirements for earning a certificate of participation at the end of the course.

This course is very flexible, and if you are behind with the materials, you have the entire length of the course to complete them. We do recommend you complete each of the following before the end of each week so you don't fall behind:

- Video lectures
- Readings and handouts/exercises
- Participation in the discussion forums
- Quizzes covering concepts from video lectures and/or readings

The course is divided into four weekly modules

Introduction Module: Fundamentals of digital investigations

In the introductory module, you will get an overview of the course structure and meet the instructors. You'll also read about the fundamentals of digital investigations, and get your computer set up with the correct (free!) software and plugins.

Module 1: Investigating people and social media accounts

Brandy Zadrozny, investigative reporter, NBC News

- Using social media and public information to investigate a person
- Investigating who's really behind a social media account
- Applying your backgrounding research to inform a story

Module 2: Search techniques for finding and monitoring

Jane Lytvynenko, senior reporter, BuzzFeed News

- Monitoring and investigating Twitter using advanced keyword searches and Tweetdeck
- Searching Facebook
- Verifying images and videos using reverse search and WeVerify

Module 3: Investigating websites

Craig Silverman, media editor, BuzzFeed News

- Analyzing the content and social spread of a website
- Using whois records to examine the ownership and details of a domain name
- Connecting websites together using Google AdSense and Analytics codes

Module 4: Network analysis

Johanna Wild, investigator and tech innovation lead, Bellingcat

- Learning the basics of network analysis, and how to apply it to digital investigations
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- Performing network analysis using data from social networks
- Using data visualization for network analysis