

# CONF 398/695: Countering Violent Extremism Syllabus

Meets Mondays 1:30- 4:10 pm- students can attend either in in Founder's Hall Room 322, Arlington Campus or Merten Hall Room 3001, Fairfax Campus

Faculty: Dr. Julie Shedd, John DeRosa, Derek Sweetman

Office Hours: By appointment

Contact: [jshedd@gmu.edu](mailto:jshedd@gmu.edu) Please indicate CONF 398/695 in the Subject Line

## Course Description:

The digital space, particularly social media is a space where modern conflicts play out and public opinion is mobilization around conflicts. Some of these spaces are sites where violence is advocated and extremist views are advanced. Governments and other official institutions are taking strides to try and control, counter or address violent narratives that are in the media with mixed impact. Students in this course will be part of an international competition to design social media strategies to disrupt the social media recruitment process of extremist groups. Students will design and implement a pilot social media strategy that engages with violent narratives and offers alternative constructions. Throughout the semester, students will learn about narratives and social media and the limitations of engaging violent narratives in the media space. Students will then design and implement a social media campaign that engages the violent narratives and offers potentially constructive counter narratives. Students will also have the opportunity to design an evaluation strategy for their social media campaign.

The class is structured to enable students to:

- Understand the nature of the problem of extremism in social media
- Design a social media experimental campaign for addressing extremism that also provides an evaluation of this campaign
- Conduct the social media experiment
- Evaluate it
- Report out findings of the evaluation, discussing the results of this experiment in addressing extremism in social media

This is a “hands-on” course where students learn by doing, and reflecting on the nature of their assumptions that structured their project, both as strengths and limitations.

## Context

Our project will be focused on the spread of violent extremism in Kosovo. Currently Kosovo is the largest per capita source of foreign fighters for ISIS and related organizations. Through the semester we expect we will be working with partners and other students to assist us with the Kosovo context.

## Registration and Partner Resources

Our class is happening as part of an international contest to design and implement a social media campaign in collaboration with our “client” EdAdventure Partners. In order to participate and have access to the resources provided by our partners students must register for the program using the following link: <http://www.tinyurl.com/evpregration> All participating students are required to register for the competition.

You have been invited to join our project page at BaseCamp. This portal will be how we receive resources and communication and how we update our project partners.

## Grading

Students will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- For both undergraduate and graduate students, the bulk of the grade (70%) will be based on participation in the project activities and project deliverables as decided on by the teams. These deliverables will be put together by our class collectively. Faculty will seek feedback from group members, about the nature and quality of participation of their group members; each student will get an evaluation by their group’s member, rating them on a scale of 0-100. A traditional grading scale will apply (90-100=A; 80-89 = B; 70-79=C; and below 70 is failing).
- Reflection Blogs/Papers- done as individuals
  - Undergraduate (CONF 398)
    - 2 blog entries through the course of the semester and 1 final 7 page reflection paper
  - Graduate (CONF 695)
    - 3 blog entries through the course of the semester and 1 final 10 page reflection paper

## Assignments

Deliverables to the Client (Participation and Contributions 70% of the grade)- done as a class

- 9/15 Completed Budget Request
- 10/26 Completed Creative Brief & Samples
- 12/7 Final Submission

Reflective Assignments- done as individuals

- Undergraduate:

- Reflective Blogs will be due on the following dates through Blackboard, 1 week before a prompt will be posted on blackboard (5% of grade each):
  - 9/19
  - 10/31
- Final 7 page reflective assignment due at 4 pm on 12/19 (20% of final grade)
- Graduate:
  - Reflective Blogs will be due on the following dates through Blackboard, 1 week before a prompt will be posted on blackboard (5% of grade each):
    - 9/19
    - 10/31
    - 11/21
  - Final 10 page reflective assignment due at 4 pm on 12/19 (15% of final grade)

## Readings:

Given that the course is designed to be one anchored on students' design efforts, there will be few assigned readings. Rather, students will be conducting their own research online.

There is an initial assignment due *BEFORE* the first class (8/29/2016), intended to provide you an introduction to the topic of social media and extremist narratives.

- Thompson, Robin L.. "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 167-190
- Hardy, S. (2008). Mediation and Genre. *Negotiation Journal* July 2008 247.

However, will be asking students to read, and prepare for presentation, 2 readings on the relationship between social media and extremism; we, as instructors will provide a list of resources from which you may choose or you may also choose to read and present materials which are not on the list. These should be readings which expand our understanding of the nature of problem that social media poses for promoting extremism (violent narratives).

Finally, we ask you to explore some databases on extremism, including:

- Global Terrorism Index: <http://economicsandpeace.org/research/iep-indices-data/global-terrorism-index>
- "Hate and Extremism" on the Southern Poverty Law Center website, which tracks "hate groups" within the US at <http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/hate-and-extremism>

## Course Calendar:

8/29/2016

- Introductions and Course Logistics
- Developing the Structure of our Team

- Assignment:
  - All Students shall read
    - Gamaghleyan, Philip. “Social Media: A New Track of Multi-Track Diplomacy”, in *Peacemaking from Practice to Theory*. Praeger 2011. Ch 29
    - Brand or be Branded: <http://beautifultrouble.org/principle/brand-or-be-branded/>
    - Bring the issue home: <http://beautifultrouble.org/principle/bring-the-issue-home/>
    - Choose tactics that support your strategy (<http://beautifultrouble.org/principle/choose-tactics-that-support-your-strategy/>)
    - Know your cultural terrain ([beautifultrouble.org/principle/know-your-cultural-terrain/](http://beautifultrouble.org/principle/know-your-cultural-terrain/))
  - We will be dividing other resources up across the teams to research and read

9/12/16

- Presentation and discussion of resources
  - This will support our collective understanding of the nature of the problem at the intersection of social media and extremist narratives.
- Briefing and Overview of Kosovo Case: Guest Speaker Shpend Kursani
- Overview of Design Process and Brainstorming
  - Project Team formation
- **Budget Request Due by 9/15/16**

9/19/2016- 10/24/2018

- Project Design work session (in teams)
- Class reflection on design issues
- **Blogs Due**
  - **Undergraduate 9/19**
  - **Graduate 9/19**
- **Creative Brief Due 10/26**

10/31/16- 12/5/2016

- Team work, in groups, on project implementation
- Class discussion of issues surrounding project implementation
- **Blogs Due**
  - **Undergraduate 10/31**
  - **Graduate 10/31 & 11/21**
- **Final Submission to Clients Due 12/7**

12/19/2016

- Wrap Up and Evaluations
- **Final Reflection Submission Due 12/19**