New Student Research Opportunities!

Understanding “Fake News” About North Korea

Jointly sponsored by the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies
and the Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies

Project supervised by Mike Izbicki, Assistant Professor of Computer Science

There has been widespread concern in recent years that “fake news” is damaging our democratic institutions. Fake news about North Korea is a particularly salient problem due to the lack of reliable sources and highly politicized reporting. As a result, a 2019 survey published in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists found that Americans are “deeply misinformed” about the nuclear crisis unfolding in North Korea.

As part of his overall research program, Professor Izbicki is working to develop machine learning algorithms that can detect and stop the spread of this misinformation, resulting in better informed citizens. This particular project, “Understanding ‘Fake News’ About North Korea,” focuses on the humanistic aspect of fake news algorithms. Fake news is a human problem, and technology cannot hope to solve this problem without close human supervision.

This project involves three different opportunities for students (position descriptions on the reverse side of this flyer). Expected workload of five hours a week for approximately 20 weeks over the course of the academic year.

All positions posted on Handshake.

All applications require a resume and a brief statement of interest that includes specification of qualifications. Transcripts (which can be unofficial) are required for all applicants in the class of 2020, 2021, and 2022; applicants from the class of 2023 do not need to supply transcripts.

Note that the Career Consultants at the Soll Center are available for help with resume-building.

Application deadline: Friday, Sept. 13 at 5 p.m.
Position Descriptions

Data Labelers. Handshake ID# 3057075.

A team of 10 students will work to create a dataset of human-annotated fake news. The only requirement is an interest in North Korea and fake news. Open to students of all years, and first year students are particularly encouraged to apply. Students with foreign language skills in Korean, Japanese, Chinese, or Russian and students interested in CMC’s data science sequence are also encouraged to apply, but none of these skills are necessary.

Research Assistant #1 (International Relations). Handshake ID# 3057086.

There are many websites dedicated to analyzing news about North Korea (such as 38north.org, nknews.org, and northkoreatech.org). Each of these sites regularly publishes articles that fact check stories in the mainstream news, but there is currently no centralized repository of common incorrect facts. As a result, we do not have a good understanding of how these incorrect facts impact relations between North Korea and other countries. RA #1 will work to create this centralized repository of common incorrect facts, and to measure the impact of these incorrect facts on relations with North Korea. In doing so, they will write and publish a short paper on this topic. With RA #2, they will also help supervise the student data labelers. RA #1’s work will be co-supervised by Professor Izbicki and Professor Hanzhang Liu (Political Studies, Pitzer). Applicants should be sophomores, juniors, or seniors who are majoring in or who have significant background in international relations; knowledge of an East Asian language or programming would be a plus but is not required.

Research Assistant #2 (Ethics). Handshake ID# 3057263.

Detecting fake news is a technical issue, but how algorithms should react to fake news is an unexplored ethical issue. For example, if an algorithm detects that a tweet contains misinformation, should it: delete the tweet, reply with an explanation of why the information is wrong, or something else? The answer is likely to depend on factors such as: whether the writer was intentionally or accidentally spreading misinformation, whether the message was written as satire, and the algorithm’s accuracy in detecting misinformation. In order to develop and deploy a fake news prevention algorithm, many ethical review boards will need to approve the algorithm. These review boards include CMC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), NSF’s Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) panel, conference specific panels, and ethical review panels at social media companies such as Twitter and Facebook. Each of these panels has different constraints on what they consider an ethical algorithm. RA #2 will work to categorize the ethical issues involved in deploying fake news algorithms and to use this categorization to create a plan for follow-on algorithmic research that satisfies each of these ethical review panels. In doing so, they will write an publish a short paper on this topic. With RA #1, they will also help supervise the student data labelers. RA #2’s work will be co-supervised by Professor Izbicki and Professor Briana Toole (Philosophy, CMC). Applicants should be sophomores, juniors, or seniors who are majoring in or who have significant background in the humanities; programming experience would be a plus but is not required.