Truth and Power in Artificial Intelligence
Spring 2022
Wed. 12:20-3:05, McEniry 116
Zoom links are on the Canvas Page as needed
Syllabus version 1/7/22

Course Objectives and Description: Artificial intelligence (AI) is often touted as revolutionary in fields ranging from healthcare to transportation. However, AI algorithms are always deployed both as part of sociotechnical systems and into existing social and political contexts. For this reason, the actual effects of AI systems depend on a complex series of interactions, and often have little to do with simplistic promises of revolutionary change. Work in AI “ethics” thus needs to be supplemented by work on the political economy of AI as well as how it is implicated in relations of social knowledge and power. In this course we will study critical theoretical literature on AI systems to better understand these relations, with attention to specific AI deployments such as natural language processing and specific issues such as fairness.

As much as possible, I want to conduct this class as a seminar, where much of the discussion is student-driven. The members of the class come from a variety of different backgrounds (and from very different disciplines), and I view that as a strength: students are encouraged to use course materials in the context of their own individual studies, and to bring their diverse perspectives to class discussion.

And now, the Covid part. As I work on this, the university has just moved the first two weeks of the semester online due to the Omicron surge. This underscores the need for flexibility on everyone’s part, as well as open channels of communication. If you get covid, have caregiving responsibilities for someone else who does, are immunocompromised, etc., please keep me in the loop as much as appropriate so that we can work out what to do. If you haven’t gotten vaccinated (and boosted, if appropriate), please do so. I can explain the basic science if you need, but vaccination means that even if you get Covid, it probably won’t be nearly as bad (and the booster seems to do more than just restock your antibodies – it improves them). If there’s a mask mandate (which I expect there will be), you have to follow it.

Readings: on Canvas as PDF’s (complete bibliography at the end of the syllabus). You do need to get one book, because we’re going to be reading most of it. It’s current (came out in May 2021), and it does a great job of putting together a lot of the critiques of AI into an overarching narrative. It’s also accessible – you don’t need either a philosophy or a computer science background to understand it:

Crawford, Kate. Atlas of AI. Yale UP, 2021 (Amazon lists it at $22 currently)

Grading/Requirements (10 point scale, with +/- so B+ = 87, B = 83, B- = 80): The requirements are slightly different for graduate and undergraduate students. I list them here, and then follow with short descriptions.
Graduate:

Short Assignments: 30% (total)
Reading Presentation: 10%
Prospectus: 10%
Paper Presentation: 10%
Seminar paper: 40%

Undergraduate:

Short Assignments: 30% (total)
Reading Presentation: 10%
Short Paper: 15%
Long Paper: 30%
Final: 15%

Short Assignments [both undergrad and grad]: Five times over the semester, you should prepare a short summary of one of the readings for that class (where you turn it in at the beginning of the class discussing the reading in question – once we’ve talked about a text, you can’t then go back and summarize it). Two of these need to be done by mid-term grade deficiency day. The summary should clearly state (a) the basic argument of the text, and (b) the primary supporting arguments/evidence used to defend that argument. This is not a book report, and you should not summarize “he says this, then he goes on to say that…” Your goal should be to extract the important parts of the argument and present them synthetically – in the manner of an extended abstract. Minor points do not go in this; the major ones do. You should conclude with (c) an assessment of the greatest strength of the argument – what is most compelling about it, and why; and (d) a criticism of the argument – something you think is wrong with the paper, and why. The entire assignment shouldn’t be much more than 2-3 pages, double-spaced. Try to be both concise and precise. I expect you to find this difficult; it is. But it’s an important skill. The grading on these is check-plus (95), check (85), or check-minus (75).

Reading Presentation [both undergrad and grad]: Every week, a group of three students will (collectively, collaboratively) briefly present one of the readings for the week and lead discussion of it. For your presentation, you should be able to present the thesis of the article and main points of the outline. You should then be ready to lead a discussion of significant points of difficulty in it (ex. things you didn’t understand), intersections with other issues and readings, and so forth. We will signup for these the first week.

Short Paper [undergrad only]: This is a 4-6 page paper on an assigned topic (TBA). You will be graded on the quality of your argument and your development of it. You should have a clear thesis statement: “In this paper I will argue that…” If you can’t finish that sentence with a straight face, you don’t have a thesis. It’s due just before spring break.

Prospectus [grad only]: This is a brief statement of where you’re going with your seminar paper. It should include (a) a thesis. Even if you can’t have a thesis ready, you should have a
topic, along with a justification/explanation of why that topic is worth looking at and a direction you want to take it; (b) a literature survey – you need to have at least 4 sources listed, with an indication of why each of them is included; (c) if possible, a very rough outline of how you plan to structure the paper. This assignment is for your own benefit, so the more you can put into it, the more it will help you – even if you end up changing a lot of what you are doing between writing the prospectus and the final paper. It’s also due just before spring break.

**Paper Presentation [grad only]:** This is a brief presentation (10 minutes or so) for the class of your seminar paper. You’re doing it before the paper is complete, so I don’t expect you to have everything nailed down (so you can say things like “I’m still getting the evidence for this point” or “I realize the argument here isn’t complete, but here’s what I’m trying to do.”). You need to be able to present the main argument of your paper (i.e., thesis and outline) such that you can solicit feedback – we’ll have discussion of the paper after the presentation.

**Seminar paper [grad only]:** This is a 12-15 page (usual format: double-spaced, 12 point, reasonable margins) paper due on the last day of class. You will develop a topic of your own choosing related to the course readings. The paper must be about (in some significant way) normative (ethical, moral, political economy, even legal, though clear that with me first) issues in AI. More information closer to due-date. *You must submit a passing seminar paper in order to pass the class.*

**Long Paper [undergrad only]:** This is a 6-8 page paper due on the last day of class. Topics will be assigned (my current plan is to have you talk about an application of AI that we didn’t cover in class); you will need to specifically reference/cite and discuss at least two of the readings from the semester. By “specifically reference/cite,” I mean quote and discuss in a way that indicates you have assimilated the material. For the sake of your grade, you should have a clear thesis and an “In this paper I will argue that x” sentence, somewhere in the first paragraph. I’ll have more details for you closer to the due date.

**Final exam [undergrad only]:** This is a written exam (essay and/or short answer) designed to test your comprehension of the material. I will give you questions in advance, and you’ll write answers to one of them during the test period – there are no surprises here.

**Attendance/Participation:** You can't learn very much in philosophy by just sitting there. You learn even less if you're not there at all. Attendance is expected. I know that schedules are complicated even in the best of times, which these are not. If you have extenuating circumstances, try to communicate them with me so we can work something out.

**Contact Information/Getting Assistance:** It is important that you not fall behind. I want to help you avoid doing so. To get help from me:

1. Speak to me before or after class; we can set an appointment to talk at a later time if need be.
2. Office hours: By appointment; I’m not sure how much I will be on campus this semester. But we can set up zoom meetings.
3. Email me at ghull@uncc.edu. This is probably the best way to get in touch.
Disabilities: I share UNCC’s commitment to provide reasonable accommodations to enable students with disabilities to access course material. Please address any special needs or special accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as you become aware of your needs. You’ll also need to contact disability services. My sense is that formal disability accommodation will be less useful than other strategies for Covid-related issues, but I am happy to strategize with you about that.

Academic Integrity: This syllabus incorporates university policy on academic integrity as found at http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-407.

Title IX: Title IX is legislation designed to ensure that women are able to attend university in an environment that respects their safety and dignity as human beings, recognizing their right to be free from sexual harassment and other forms of gender discrimination and violence. I support the goals of Title IX. Please note: the university designated all faculty members as required reporters. This means that if you tell me (or say something in a forum post) about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, I am likely to be legally required to report the information to the Title IX Coordinator. Resources to help you are here: https://titleix.uncc.edu/resources-university-policies/resources and those marked as "confidential" are not required to report to the Title IX office. You should also know that the Title IX office will not pursue an investigation without your consent.

Proposed Readings/Schedule (not a contract!)

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**Citations**


Green, B. (2020). Data Science as Political Action: Gounding Data Science in a Politics of Justice. *arXiv Preprint 1811.03435v3*


