



SPOTLIGHT

Professor Brian Ekdale Awarded \$1.7 Million Grant

Associate Professor **Brian Ekdale** and his collaborators have been awarded a \$1.7 million grant to study the spread of strategic information operations (SIOs) on social media. Their project, "Identifying and Measuring User and Platform Vulnerabilities to Strategic Information Operations," was selected for funding by the Department of Defense's Minerva Research Initiative, which supports basic social science research related to national security.

The United States and its allies face a growing threat of influence campaigns organized by foreign actors to spread propaganda, disinformation, or manipulative content on social media platforms. These SIOs rely on user behaviors and algorithmic processes to circulate their content. Ekdale's team is studying how user- and platform- specific vulnerabilities are exploited by SIOs to increase their reach and effectiveness.

"What we're studying is the interaction between people and platforms and the feedback loop that takes place between the people and the platforms," said Ekdale.

The goals of the study are to identify platform vulnerabilities to SIOs and to propose mitigation measures for the identified vulnerabilities. This study examines user engagement in three regions—the United States, Central and Eastern Europe, and East Africa.

The interdisciplinary research utilizes humanistic, social scientific, and computational methods to understand platforms' vulnerabilities to SIOs. The study uses a mixed methods design where each research finding informs the next step in the research process.

The research is being conducted by the Algorithms and Culture Research Group, which includes SJMC doctoral students **Katy Biddle** and **Javie Ssozi** as well as University of Iowa assistant professor of computer science **Rishab Nithyanand** and computer science doctoral students **Hussam Habib** and **Sarmad Chandio**.

External collaborators on the project include associate professor of communication arts and sciences at Penn State **Andrew High**, assistant professor of digital journalism at Appalachian State University **Volha Kananovich**, assistant professor of African and African American studies and film and media studies at Washington University in St. Louis **Raven Maragh-Lloyd** and assistant professor of advertising at Drake **Ryan Stoldt**. Kananovich and Stoldt both received doctoral degrees from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, while Maragh-Lloyd received her doctorate from Communication Studies at Iowa.

SPOTLIGHT

Professor Rachel Young named Scripps Howard Teacher of the Year



The Scripps Howard Fund and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication selected University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication associate professor Dr. **Rachel Young** to receive the 2022 Scripps Howard Teacher of the Year Award.

Candidates are recognized for excellence in teaching in several areas, including innovative teaching practices, influences on curriculum, mentoring of students and faculty, scholarship as it relates to teaching, leadership in educational activities and ongoing industry engagement inside and

outside the classroom. This is a national competition and only one award is presented each year.

Young is highly engaged with journalism and media professionals, the surrounding community, and students. As Director of Undergraduate Studies, she has worked extensively to make resources accessible and has created new opportunities for students.

In Prof. Young's classes, students have produced work that is meaningful to them and the communities they partnered with. Students developed a comprehensive bike safety campaign for Sioux City, Iowa, created Spanish and Mandarin-language victim services brochures for the Johnson County Prosecutor, and developed a campaign that led to the passing of a hotel occupancy tax in Washington, Iowa, that will earn \$30,000-\$40,000 annually for tourism promotion and community development.

Building on her experience with community partners, Prof. Young developed the Coralville Media Collaborative. This initiative connects SJMC students and classes with community organizations and small businesses in Coralville, Iowa. The goal of the Collaborative is to help students learn professional media skills while supporting the transformative work already happening in Coralville. Students work with community partners in class settings and through a community-based internship program that Prof. Young launched and directs. Prof. Young is also the recipient of the 2023 Hubbard-Walder Award for Excellence in Teaching at the University of Iowa and the 2018-2019 Collegiate Teaching Award from the College of Liberal Arts in Sciences at Ulowa.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

While students were away and the Adler building was quiet, SJMC faculty and staff have been preparing for the new academic year and continuing to excel in their work. The two featured faculty stories in this newsletter reflect this work and commitment: **Rachel Young** won the national Scripps Howard Teacher of the Year Award and **Brian Ekdale** led a team of researchers who won a \$1.7 million grant to support their research on propaganda and radicalization online.

Faculty and graduate students participated in the AEJMC annual conference in Washington, D.C., conducted field research in the U.S. and abroad, published new work, and planned new classes. **Munachim Amah**, **Rachel Young**, **Javie Ssozi**, and **David Dowling** all won awards at the AEJMC conference in recognition of their research. **Alex Scott** traveled to the U.S.-Mexico border to conduct fieldwork with photojournalists covering migration, and **Sujatha Sosale** traveled to France to conduct archival research on telecommunications infrastructure in Madagascar. Professors of Practice **Jeff Grisamore** and **Adam Kempenaar** established a partnership with the Iowa Men's Basketball team for their Fall strategic communication capstone and content marketing classes, offering students an opportunity to work across courses with a high-profile client.

SJMC also hosted the Iowa Summer Journalism Workshop in July, which brought nearly 70 high school students to campus for a four-day camp. Students worked with faculty and area professionals to develop and hone skills in writing, graphic design, leadership, and photography. This was the first in-person camp since 2019, and we were so excited to have the students on campus.

As we wrap up the summer and head into fall, we're looking forward to welcoming new faculty and students to campus and to staying connected with you throughout the year through our monthly e-newsletter and social media.

-Melissa Tully, Director

SJMC Celebrates 100 Years of Excellence!

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2024! We will mark the anniversary with events in Iowa City and around the country.

Please consider joining us for the 100th Anniversary Dinner on Saturday, April 13, 2024 at the Heights Rooftop in Iowa City. To learn more and to register visit, <https://journalism.uiowa.edu/anniversary>.