

Conspiracy Theories and the Public

POL 311/AMS 323

Instructor: Dr. Joe Uscinski

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Class Time/Room: T 6:25 - 9:05 (MM 117) & T/Th 2:00 – 3:15 (MM 109)

Office Hours: M and T, 2:00 – 4:00 or by appt. 160 D Campo Sano Building.

Mailbox: Campo Sano Building next to printer (not under my office door).

Phone: Don't

Background:

Struggling to cope with an ever-complicated world, people have a seemingly endless appetite for conspiracy theories. In the United States alone, people have imputed a stream of allegations against the British, French, Bavarian Illuminati, Freemasons, Abolitionists, Slave Power, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, ethnic fifth columns, communists, capitalists, United Nations, Skull and Bones, Bilderbergers, Hollywood, bike sharing programs, and many more.

Conspiracy theories resonate well beyond the mentally aberrant and influence a sizeable part of the population. For example, in 2006 a third of Americans shared beliefs with the 9/11 “truther” movement, that the American government knowingly allowed the attacks of 9/11. Conspiratorial beliefs have also influenced local, state, and national policy as well.

While often bizarre, conspiracy theories have broad relevance to both the contemporary and historical world. However, conspiratorial thought may be most important because such extreme forms of distrust can lead to crises of confidence in government, thus blunting the ability of institutions to lead when leadership is necessary. Beyond stymieing political institutions, conspiracy theorizing may also contribute to polarizing politics, policy deadlock, or extremism.

Purpose: This course will not serve as an exposé of conspiracy theories per se. We do not have time to explore every conspiracy theory (there are millions). We will not try to figure out who *really* killed Kennedy. Nor will we discover the “truth” behind reports of alien abduction. Instead, this course takes a broad interdisciplinary approach to the study of conspiratorial thought, involving research from the history, psychology, political science, philosophy, and sociology fields. Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

Learning Outcomes: Upon leaving this course, students will:

1. have a strong understanding of the history of conspiracy theorizing,
2. have the necessary tools to distinguish conspiracy theories from scientific theories, and
3. have a strong understanding of the psychological, political, and social forces that lead to conspiratorial thought.

Furthermore, this course will improve the following skills:

1. Writing Skills; (this course offers a writing credit)
2. Reading Comprehension
3. Speaking
4. Critical Thinking

Course Structure: I will keep class time fresh, pertinent, and interesting. Class time will combine lecture, video presentations, and group activities. This class offers a writing credit so we will spend a significant portion of class time improving your writing skills.

Grading: I will base your grade on your performance on your written assignments and your participation in class. I will base your grade upon your performance, and only your performance. I cannot grant special favors for any reason. I do not care if you need a grade to stay on an athletic team, or remain a member of your extra-curricular group, or keep your scholarship. You have the most control over your grade. I will grade you fairly; however, I do not negotiate grades. I will happily discuss your performance in the course at any time and I will help you improve your work; but, I will not change grades simply because the outcome upsets you.

Final Grade Breakdown:

Reading Summaries (10 x 5 points):	50%
Responses (6 x 5 points each):	30%
Conspiracy Theory in the News:	7%
Conspiracy Theory Paper:	7%
Conspiracy Theory Response:	7%

Reading Summaries: Turn these in at the beginning of class each week. For example, hand in the readings for week five when we meet Tuesday during week five. You will write a one paragraph original summary for each paper/chapter assigned for the week. For instance, if the reading for the week contains three papers, you will turn in three paragraph long summaries. We will extensively discuss your progress on the summaries in class. This exercise will 1. force you to read and digest the material, and 2. improve your writing skills. You should complete 10 weeks. **Notes: Times New Roman 12 Font, Single Spaced, Black Ink, White paper, Stapled if need, your name and section, 1" margins, proper week number as stated on syllabus, each summary briefly labeled. Failure to follow these simple rules will lead me to hand back your work ungraded.**

I will grade your reading summaries based upon the following rubric:

1. Substance

Does the writing include the relevant information?

Does the writing exclude irrelevant and less important information?

Would the reader know more about the topic than they did before reading?

2. Delivery

Does the writing follow a logical order?

Does the organization highlight major points and questions?

3. Style

Does the summary provide information efficiently (no passive voice, no extraneous words?)

Does the summary read well grammatically (no spelling or grammatical errors)?

Course Text: *American Conspiracy Theories* by Uscinski and Parent (2014), paperback edition.

Responses: You will write six one page summary/responses to the films/guest lectures. Turn these in the following week. If you miss class, I cannot make the videos or guest lectures available to you. I will grade your responses based upon the following rubric: **Notes: Times New Roman 12 Font, Single Spaced, Black Ink, White paper, Stapled if needed, your name, section, and movie title, 1" margins, full page. No Tricks.**

1. Does the writing clearly convey the material watched?
2. Does the writing express new or interesting ideas in response to the movie?
3. Does the writing convey ideas efficiently?

Conspiracy Papers: For the first, you will write a one page single-spaced paper detailing and debunking a contemporary conspiracy theory. For the second and third, you will write a brief paper detailing a conspiracy theory that you develop yourself. You will then trade this paper with another student in the class who will write a paper “debunking” your conspiracy theory.

Participation: I expect you to show up to every class period having read the assigned material. I expect you to discuss and pose questions about the material with the class during every class period. While participation and success cannot occur without attendance, attendance does not count as participation by itself. Sitting in the back of the room like a potato does not equate to active participation. I will not award points for participation, but I reserve the right to remove as much as a letter grade if for poor participation. I expect you to stay informed of political events.

Writing Exercises: We will do several writing exercises in class. These will help you improve your writing skills. You should apply the lessons learned here to your work both in and out of this course. I strongly recommend that you go to the writing center with **every** summary.

Reading: Students must read all assigned material, whether they write a summary that week or not. Skimming and skipping do not count as reading. Students should have answers to the following questions after completing each reading:

1. What is the problem or question(s)?
2. What is the answer or solution?
3. What are the research design, data, and method of analysis?
4. What are the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of the work?

Plagiarism: I do not tolerate academic dishonesty in any form. See me if you have any questions or see the student handbook. I reserve the right to fail any student who plagiarizes in any way or engages in any form of dishonest academic conduct. I will bring all cases to the University Honor Council. Academic misconduct includes (but is not limited to): Copying another students' work, turning in work similar to another students', turning in work that is not original and completely your own, turning in work that represents other people's efforts, cutting and pasting from other's work or texts, “splitting” the work with another student, turning in another student's work from a previous semester, not properly citing other's work and ideas. I do not recommend working together in any way.

Schedule:

Week	Topic	Readings
1	Introduction	None
2	Introduction	None
3	Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uscinski and Parent – pg. 1-16 2. Shapiro – The Risk of Disease 3. Reason – Ruby Ridge 4. NYT – Hawaii and NGOs
4	History	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gribbon – AntiMasonry 2. Wood – Conspiracy and the Paranoid 3. Latner – Here are no Newters’
5	Philosophy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uscinski and Parent Ch. 2 2. Coady – Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational? 3. Husting and Orr – Dangerous Machinery
6	Problems of Evidence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lewandowsky - The role of Conspiracist Ideation 2. De Haven Smith - When Political Crimes Are Inside Jobs 3. Nyhan, Reifler, Udall – Health Care
7	Sociological Explanations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bird and Bogart – Birth Control 2. Briggs – Cholera Epidemic 3. Simmons and Parsons – Beliefs
8	Psychological Explanations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson – Why Believe? 2. Uscinski and Parent – pgs. 17-22, Ch. 4 3. Wood and Douglas – Dead or Alive
9	Biases	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. McClosky and Chong – Similarities and Differences 2. Bartels – Beyond the Running Tally 3. McHoskey – Case Closed?
10	Internet and Ideology	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lewandowsky – Recursive Fury 2. Levondowsky – Lunar Landings 3. Wood and Douglas – Building 7
11	Political Explanations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uscinski and Parent Ch. 3 2. Uscinski and Parent Ch. 5 3. Uscinski and Parent Ch. 6
12	Science	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oliver and Wood – Medical Conspiracy Theories 2. Furnham – Commercial Conspiracy Theories 3. Litvay et al. - Violence
13.	Stuff	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Litvay et al. - Populism 2. Douglas and Sutton – Does it Take one? 3. Grzesiak-Feldman - High-Anxiety Situations
14.	Now What?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sunstein and Vermuele – Causes and Cures 2. Markley – Alien Assassins 3. Uscinski and Parent Ch. 7

Words to the Wise (or the not so wise):

1. I do not accept emailed work. Do not email any work to me for any reason, ever. I will delete such emails without notice. You must turn in all work on hard copy. I have a mailbox in Campo Sano – find it.
2. I will delete rude, disrespectful, and/or poorly written emails without reply.
3. I will return poorly done and incomplete work ungraded; you will receive a grade of zero.
4. In order to succeed, you must attend. If you must miss a class session, get the notes from a classmate. Make a friend now! I cannot lend out class notes, materials, or videos. I will not reteach class sessions for you in person or over email. And yes, you did miss something important.
5. If you have something more important than class to attend, then go do that. Do not tell me. I don't care. You make your own choices. You alone are responsible for the consequences of your actions.
6. I will happily drop uncommitted, casual, or disruptive students.
7. I will not offer incompletes without a notice from the Dean's office. Get your work done now! If you have an issue, see me before the issue destroys your semester. We can work something out. Showing up in the last week of class to explain on-going problems indicates irresponsibility and will lead to an F-.
8. Do not arrive late. If you do, please enter quietly and sit in the back. Do not make it a habit. You have little reason to arrive late.
9. I will not teach the readings in class. You have the responsibility of digesting and comprehending the readings. Read and re-read until you understand. Lectures will expand upon the readings, but not teach or summarize them. You may, of course, ask about the readings in class. I am not interested in holding your hand; you are in college.
10. Do not treat me like a television screen. Do not come to class and read the paper, talk on your phone, play on the computer, send text messages, play footsies, or chat with your buddies. I will ask you to leave and refer disruptive behavior to the Dean's office.
11. You must turn off and put away all phones, computers, pagers, blackberries, etc... (not on vibrate or silent). No exceptions. If I catch you texting, talking, chatting, etc.. I will ask you to leave. Texting under the desk fools no one.
12. Use old fashioned notebooks and pens for taking notes; no laptops allowed.
13. I will report threatening behavior, disruptive behavior, plagiarism, and dishonesty to the appropriate campus office.
14. Students that require special accommodations should see me immediately. If you do not see me immediately, I may lack the ability to accommodate you.
15. All correspondence, email and otherwise, must have a cordial and respectful tone. Please include your name and course section. I will try to respond within 48 hours. With this said, I will only respond to emails requesting to see me in my office or to discuss a long-term absence. I will delete all other unrequested emails. Try to answer questions in class, on your own, or by seeing me in office hours. Utilize office hours!
16. Do not treat me as a "grading slave." I will make every effort to return your work as soon as possible, but your progress in this class depends on the work that you do, and not on the grades that I give you along the way. In other words, your work will improve through repetition and intense effort, rather than through the numbers posted on Blackboard or the comments I write on your papers (my comments, of course, will help you along the way,

but, you must abide by them). I will try to return summaries each week in the first few weeks. As the semester progresses and you get the swing of things, however, I will return them only every few weeks. Do not turn in the same assignment twice. Keep track of your own work by keeping electronic and graded copies. I will post grades on Blackboard; however the final grade may not reflect your true final grade.

17. The professor reserves the right to alter this syllabus at will. Please keep up with any changes.
18. For health reasons, I do not shake hands. If you are sick, don't come to class; stay home.
19. Good Luck! If you heed my advice, you will leave here understanding conspiratorial thought better than most people you will ever meet. If you do not heed my advice, you will surely leave in disappointment.