

PHIL 401: Conspiracy Theories, Propaganda, and Epistemic Vice

Winter 2021: WF 12:30-2:20 p.m.

Contact Info

Instructor: Ian Schnee

Email: ischnee@uw.edu

Office hours: Wednesday from 2:30 to 3:20 p.m. Pacific Time

Office location: Zoom (links in Canvas)

Remote Course Structure

This course is entirely online. Class will be synchronous via Zoom during our assigned slot in the time schedule: Weds. and Fri. 12:30-2:20 p.m. PT. All Zoom links are in Canvas. Classes will be recorded. Some provisions will be made for students who must do the course asynchronously, for example because they are in a drastically different time zone—please contact the instructor right away if that applies to you.

Overview

Do conspiracy theories appeal to our epistemic vices? Is it ever rational to believe a conspiracy theory? Are conspiracy theories forms of political propaganda? What is propaganda and is it always manipulative? How are we easily influenced and manipulated by technology, media and misinformation? Course topics will include the epistemology and ethics of disagreement, ethical and aesthetic frameworks for analyzing propaganda, philosophical views of conspiracy theories, and the ethics of persuasive technology.

Learning Objectives

In this course students will:

- Distinguish between conspiracy theories and theories of conspiracies.
- Apply philosophical theories of conspiracy theories to current conspiracy theories.
- Analyze conspiracy theories using empirical results from cognitive science, sociology and political science.
- Distinguish the nature and function of different kinds of propaganda.
- Evaluate moral and aesthetic features of propaganda films.
- Analyze ethical dimensions of persuasive technologies and app design features, such as social media.
- Create strategies, based on philosophical and psychological work on intellectual vices, for recognizing and combating misinformation.
- Provide and receive feedback from their peers on how to effectively communicate philosophical ideas.
- Collaborate with their peers to develop and evaluate solutions to combat misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Books

There are no books to buy for the course. All readings will be made available in Canvas. The most handy external recourse for the course will be access to Netflix, since some of the documentaries we will watch will be there in better quality (but Netflix is not required).

Grading and Course Requirements

The grading in this class is a bit different than most courses, so please read this section carefully!

Grading is done on the UW 4.0 scale, not on a % scale. Each assignment that you do accrues UW points, and your grade at the end of the quarter will just be the **sum** of all the points that you accrue. In a sense, all of the assignments are optional, though you must earn at least 0.7 points to pass the class. You need to set your own course goals, keep diligent about doing the work to meet them, and track your progress throughout the quarter.

There are two groups of points for the class:

- 1) The final project, worth 1.0 points.
- 2) Everything else, worth 3.0 points total.

Final project: The only way to earn these 1.0 points is by completing the final project. So the final project is the only “required” assignment, in the sense that you cannot earn those points by doing any other assignment. But it is not required to pass the class; if you earn more than 0.7 points from the other assignments, you will still pass.

For the final project, you will provide an analysis (in the form of a 5-to-10-page paper) of a specific conspiracy or technology using the resources from the class. It will require independent research on the conspiracy theory or technology; an analysis of the theory or technology using philosophical and other tools from the course; an evaluation of impacts of the theory or technology; and a proposal for action on the theory or technology, in light of the course materials on reacting to conspiracy theories and manipulative technologies. Additional directions and a rubric will be provided in Canvas. The final project will be due during finals week at the end of the quarter.

Everything else: For the rest of the 3.0 points in the course, you can earn them by doing any combination of the other assignments available. There are two different types of assignments you can do:

- (i) **Lecture journals:** Worth 0.1 points each. For each day of class, there will be several activities and writing opportunities, as well as a final 5-minute reflection writing prompt assigned at the end of class. You can turn in this document (which you will basically complete by participating in the day’s class) by Saturday at the end of the week. If it is sufficiently thoughtful and complete, it will earn 0.1 points for that day. Given that there are 20 classes, students can earn up to 2.0 points total via lecture journals.
- (ii) **Matrix analyses:** Worth 0.5 points each. A matrix analysis is a short 2-to-4-page paper you write using a matrix tool. There will be two different matrix tools: one for

readings and one for conspiracy theories. The matrix tool for readings will be provided for you, and the matrix tool for conspiracy theories will be created by our class. For example, the matrix tool for conspiracy theories will be some sort of two-dimensional grid asking you to identify different parties and stakeholders involved in the conspiracy claims as well as in the production of the theory, and to evaluate the ethical impacts and consequences of the theory. Then you provide a short report explaining the results of your grid. You can complete matrix analyses for various topics each week, depending on the class content. Each one will be graded with a 5-part rubric (in Canvas) and will earn up to 0.5 points.

The additive grading used in the course means there are many different ways to earn enough points for a 4.0. It also provides flexibility on which readings, conspiracies, or technologies you wish to investigate and write about, and when during the quarter you do the work. There will be periodic due dates for the journals and analyses, so be sure to plan ahead and not leave yourself too much work at the of the quarter, or too little opportunity to earn the points to meet your course goals.

Disability Resources for Students (DRS)

I am committed to the success of every student. If you have a disability or need accommodation please contact DRS, 011 Mary Gates Hall, 206-543-8924. Per university policy, all students needing special accommodation need a letter from DRS; please present it to me so we can discuss your needs for the class. See department policies below for more information.

Late Policy

In order to pass the class students must complete their work on time. To give you a break, if you have unexpected internet trouble, assignments that are less than 24 hours late will not be penalized. However, unexcused work that is more than 24 hours late will not be accepted.

The EXCEPTIONS: lateness may be excused with prior approval or demonstrated emergency. If you find yourself in difficult circumstances, please talk to me right away. Do not leave things to the end of the quarter, when it might be too late to address the issue and help you!

Privacy

All Zoom sessions in this course may be recorded for students unable to attend live. The recording will capture the presenter's audio, video and/or computer screen. Student audio and video will be recorded if they share their computer audio and video during the recorded session. The recordings will only be accessible to students enrolled in the course to review materials. These recordings will not be shared with or accessible to the public.

The University and Zoom have FERPA-compliant agreements in place to protect the security and privacy of UW Zoom accounts. Students who do not wish to be recorded should:

- Change their Zoom screen name to hide any personal identifying information such as their name or UW Net ID, and
- Not share their computer audio or video during their Zoom sessions.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating and student misconduct will not be tolerated; students caught doing any such acts will receive a 0 for the course. It is your duty to know and understand what plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are as well as the university's policy on student conduct and discipline. Here are some resources to help you:

- The Center for Teaching and Learning's page on plagiarism and cheating:
<http://www.washington.edu/teaching/cheating-or-plagiarism>
- The UW student conduct code:
<http://www.washington.edu/admin/rules/policies/WAC/478-120TOC.html>

All work for this class must be original. Submitting work from another class, even one's own work, is also plagiarism. This class uses Turn It In or other services available at UW. All cases of plagiarism, cheating, or student misconduct will be report to the Dean's Office. NOTE: I respect your right to due process. Should you be reported, the relevant committee will decide your case and (i) you may continue the course, being presumed innocent until found otherwise, and (ii) you have the right to appeal the committee's decision. (See end of syllabus for elaboration and additional department policies.)

Tentative Schedule

For additional and updated information see Canvas Modules.

Week 1

- Wednesday: Introduction: what is the philosophy of misinformation?
 - Required reading: Peñaloza 2020
- Friday: What is rationality?
 - Required reading: Pascal 1670; Clifford 1877; James 1896

Week 2

- Wednesday: Are we rational?
 - Required reading: Samuels and Stich 2004
 - Optional reading: Kahneman 2011
- Friday: What is a conspiracy theory?
 - Required reading: Uscinski 2019 Section 1 Intro; Dentith 2019
 - Optional reading: Uscinski 2020 Ch. 2

Week 3

- Wednesday: What are some important conspiracy theories?
 - Independent research on a conspiracy of your choosing
 - Suggested resources: Brotherton 2015 Ch. 2; Q Clearance podcast by Jake Hanrahan, QAnon Anonymous podcast, Rabbit Hole podcast
- Friday: What is a conspiracy mindset/mentality?
 - Required reading: Brotherton 2015 Ch. 4
 - Optional reading: Bruder et al. 2013; Brotherton et al. 2014; Stajanov and Halberstadt 2019

Week 4

- Wednesday: Are conspiracy theories epistemically vicious?
 - Required reading: Cassam 2015; Pigden 2017
 - Optional screening: *Behind the Curve* documentary on Netflix

- Friday: Who believes conspiracy theories? Is the symmetry thesis true?
 - Required reading: Uscinski and Parent 2014
 - Optional reading: Sutton and Douglas 2020; van Prooijen et al. 2015; Hofstadter 1964; Uscinski 2020

Week 5

- Wednesday: How do conspiracy theories spread? Is the internet to blame?
 - Required reading: Dewitt et al. 2019
 - Optional reading: Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018
- Friday: Are conspiracy theories propaganda?
 - Required reading: Cassam 2019

Week 6

- Wednesday: What is propaganda?
 - Stanley 2015
- Friday: Can the study of rumors illuminate conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: Difonzo 2019; Starbird 2017 recording

Week 7

- Wednesday: Do conspiracy theories do more harm than good? Are conspiracy theories fundamentally individual or social?
 - Required reading: Cassam 2019 Ch. 3
 - Optional reading: Miller et al. 2016
- Friday: How should we respond to conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: Cassam 2019 Ch. 4; The Debunking Handbook 2020
 - Optional reading: The Conspiracy Theory Handbook 2020

Week 8

- Wednesday: Does refutation or education work to combat conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: Kubin et al. 2021
 - Required reading: Bisgaard 2019; Wittenberk and Berinsky 2020; Horne et al. 2015; Betch et al. 2015
- Friday: Can empowerment combat conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: van Prooijen 2019; Teacher's guide to The Cranky Uncle Game 2021
 - Optional reading: Greenberg and Arndt 2012

Week 9

- Wednesday: Can affective solutions combat conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: Young 2021
 - Optional reading: Women Who Rock 2015
- Friday: Is the internet to blame? How do digital platforms impact conspiracy theories?
 - Required reading: Choose one platform and read the article:
 - Facebook: Bruns et al. 2020
 - Blogging: Lewandowsky et al. 2015
 - Amazon eshopping: Juneja and Mitra 2021
 - Twitter: Balestrucci et a. 2021

Week 10

- Wednesday: What digital tools help combat conspiracy theories and misinformation?
 - Required reading: Uscinski 2020 Ch. 6; Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020

- Friday: What digital tools help combat conspiracy theories and misinformation (continued)?
 - Required reading: Forestal 2021

Please see the following pages for department policies.