

EIU 4116G: Conspiracy Theories in the U.S.
Senior Seminar
Spring 2019, Section 001, 3 credits
2441 Buzzard Hall
M/W 2:00-3:15

Dr. Marita Gronnvoll

Email: mgronnvoll@eiu.edu

2534 Buzzard Hall

Office Hours: Monday, 12:00-2:00; Tuesday 12:30-1:30, Wednesday 1:00-2:00; by appointment

Catalog Description

This course examines conspiracy theories that have flourished in contemporary U.S. culture. Special attention is paid to how conspiracy arguments are crafted and how they are disseminated in our media age. Conspiracy theories are analyzed as texts that are designed to persuade others, thus we use communication and rhetorical theory to critique how these arguments are structured. The primary goal is to hone critical thinking skills by applying evaluative criteria to conspiracy theories. Prerequisite: Completion of 75 semester hours. Note: All students may take this course, but Communication Studies majors will not receive Senior Seminar credit for it.

Course Overview

This course takes a look at conspiracy theories that have flourished in contemporary U.S. culture. Because the course is housed in the Division of Communication Studies, we will pay special attention to how conspiracy arguments are crafted and how they are disseminated in our media age. Since conspiracy theories are designed to persuade others, those of us who study communication are in a unique position to scrutinize how these arguments are structured. Our primary goal is to hone critical thinking skills by applying evaluative criteria to these theories.

This course is guided by two basic assumptions. **First**, conspiracy theories are just that – theories, not statements of fact. Nor are they the same as scientific and social scientific theories that are subject to testing and revision. We must distinguish between factually established conspiracies, such as the Watergate cover-up, from unproven conspiracies, such as the Kennedy assassination, and unprovable conspiracies, such as alien life forms and UFOs. It is important to keep these distinctions in mind. While occasional lighthearted indulgence in our pet theories is encouraged and may even enliven class discussion, students will not be allowed to use this class as a forum for promoting their conspiracy beliefs.

The **second** assumption is that even though conspiracy theories often involve ludicrous, sinister, or grossly exaggerated explanations of the course of human events, they are still important for us to understand. They often express serious underlying tensions, prejudices, and apprehensions on the part of those who hold them. Understanding these tensions is more than an academic exercise. As the Oklahoma City bombing tragically demonstrated, conspiracy theories can motivate people to undertake harmful actions. Even in less harmful cases, conspiracy theorizing has serious implications for the functioning of democratic society. We need to understand how conspiracy theories influence not only how people see the world, but how they act in it.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Apply tools of critical thinking in the analysis of conspiracy theories (CT 1-5)
- Gain an understanding of why conspiracy theories flourish in contemporary U.S. culture (CT 1-5; WCR 6; RC 1)
- Apply tools of criticism to numerical data, and use numerical data in debunking conspiracy theories (CT 1-6; WCR 5; QR 1, 3-6)
- Understand and critique the rhetorical strategies used by conspiracy theorists (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
- Differentiate between real and fake news with regard to source credibility (CT 1-6)
- Recognize and evaluate the threat to democracy and civic life presented by conspiracy theories (CT 1-5; RC 1-2)
- Critique the argumentative structure of conspiracy theories for fallacies and problems of logic (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
- Formulate cogent arguments against conspiracy theories (CT 1-6; WCR 1-7)
- Hone presentation skills through group and individual presentations (SL 1-7)
- Improve writing skills through multiple writing projects (WCR 1-7)

Readings

The readings for this course vary in length, difficulty, and origination. Due to the diverse nature of our texts, there will be some day-to-day variation in terms of your reading load. Some of the essays are complex and will likely challenge you – they are not included to frustrate you – they have been chosen because they are strong examples of the positions we are discussing, and they lay out arguments in ways that are especially nuanced and sophisticated. Do not be unduly concerned if you don't "get it" the first time around. Some of these concepts require re-reading and discussion before you'll begin to fully grasp the author's thought process.

Our activities in class will be based upon my assumption that you have read and thought about the material. With this in mind, you should plan to give yourself plenty of time to read carefully, take notes appropriately, and be prepared to ask questions when necessary. You are expected to complete and process, to the best of your ability, any assigned readings before coming to class and to bring that reading to class with you. Do not give up on a reading just because you're feeling challenged by it; read the entire assignment and come to class with questions. I cannot stress enough that you are required to read for this class. **IF YOU DO NOT READ, PLEASE DO NOT COME TO CLASS.** It's a waste of my time and yours.

Uscinski, JE & JM Parent (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barkun, M (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd edition. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Additional readings uploaded to D2L. Please check the class schedule at the end of this syllabus to know what readings are assigned for any given day.

Class Climate and Conduct Expectations

While it's hard not to dismiss some conspiracy theories as ridiculous, others can be quite controversial. Some of

you will undoubtedly have strong reactions to some of our readings and issues—strong reactions are not discouraged. However, the ways in which reactions get framed and presented must be respectful and civil. In order for us all to glean the most from this course, we must create an environment in which individuals feel comfortable speaking their minds and relaying their experiences. Constructive criticism and responses are welcome (and expected). Disrespect of any kind—including discriminatory speech that creates a hostile environment with respect to race, sex, gender, sexuality, national origin, age, religion, or ability—cannot be tolerated. No one has 100% freedom of speech in the classroom, and I expect everyone to know the limits and not push them.

We will be evaluating conspiracy arguments based on their adherence to argumentation and rhetorical theories in the field of communication, and on no other criterion. That means that your personal worldview is not a basis upon which to judge conspiracy theories for this class. If you chose to hold on to a conspiracy theory that fails to hold up under the scrutiny we apply, that is your prerogative. But no student will be allowed to excessively derail class discussion by pontificating his or her viewpoint.

The expectations of student conduct are clearly outlined by the University and the Department. The Department believes that the classroom should be a positive learning environment. In order to provide students with the opportunity to do their best work and to provide a relatively comfortable learning environment, class members need to conduct themselves in an appropriate manner at all times. Students who engage in behaviors that are disruptive of this goal will not be tolerated. Possible sanctions for disruption of class range from dismissal from the course to removal from the University (see also IGP 157.1).

Cell Phones, Text Messaging, and Other Electronic Annovances

Electronic devices such as cell phones, laptop computers, and iPods have transformed our lives in many pervasive and positive ways. But, they have also become a serious issue in the classroom. Texting, surfing the Internet (i.e, Facebook, downloading music), and listening to iPods shows great disrespect for me and for your fellow students who are distracted by this conduct. In keeping with this climate of respect, **please turn off all phones and iPods (or similar devices) before class begins. If you take notes on a laptop, I expect you to show respect for your classmates and me by not surfing the Internet or cruising social media during class.**

E-Mail Policy

You are expected to check your official EIU e-mail address on a frequent and consistent basis in order to stay current with departmental and course communications. I will, on occasion, send out e-mail reminders and announcements, so please check your EIU e-mail daily. You have the responsibility to recognize that certain communications may be time-critical. “I didn’t check my e-mail,” errors in foreign mail accounts, or e-mail that is returned with “mailbox full” are not acceptable excuses for missing communications sent via e-mail.

Attendance and Participation

Participation points are given for both the quality and quantity of your participation. Quality means that you are attentive, respectful, and not engaging in so-called multi-tasking during class (e.g., texting, internet surfing, doing homework for other classes, sleeping, etc.). Quantity means that I expect every student to contribute to class discussions on a regular basis. So if you are not here, your participation will necessarily suffer. You may not make up any work you have missed in class, so it is in your best interest to be present in class. Participation grades are given at my discretion and are not subject to dispute. You begin this class with 100 points in participation and they are yours to lose. By the way, there are no class periods that are OK for you to skip without good reason, so please do not ever ask me if you will “miss anything” if you do not come to class.

Grade Disputes

There are times when students receive a grade that they genuinely believe to be in error and/or unfair. Should this occur, there is a strict procedure that must be followed. First, we will abide by the **“24-hour rule.”** This means that after I’ve returned your assignment (NOT after the grade has been posted on D2L), you must reflect upon it for 24 hours before you attempt to e-mail me or talk to me about your grade. Second, after 24 hours have passed, you must e-mail me to request an appointment to come in and talk to me about your grade. DO NOT make your argument in your e-mail! Finally, you must put your argument(s) in writing and either send me a separate e-mail prior to our appointment, or bring a hard copy with you to our appointment. If you follow these guidelines, I promise to give you a fair hearing. I do not promise that I’ll agree with you and change your grade, but I will hear you out.

After one week all grades are final!

A Note About Grades: I realize that grades are a high priority for most students. Please be aware of where you stand throughout the semester. Do not wait until the last few days of the semester and then suddenly have a panic attack because your grade is not where you thought it would be. Once the semester is over, it’s over, and no more points will be allotted. I will not accept appeals for more points, or to be “bumped up” to the next letter grade.

Grade Scale:

878 – 975 = A

780 – 877 = B

683 – 779 = C

585 – 682 = D

0 – 584 = F

Deadlines

Please pay close attention to deadlines, as you will be held to them. Assignments will be due at the beginning of class on the days listed. Late work slipped under my office door, in my mailbox, or sent by e-mail attachment will not be accepted. This policy is place to assist you in your life – deadlines are important and reflect on your credibility and professionalism. We all depend upon technology to get our work done. We all know that technology will fail. When it does, it does not constitute an excuse or an emergency. It is expected that you will prepare your assignments far enough in advance so that when your computer or printer malfunctions (as they will!) you will still have time to rectify the problem and turn in the assignment on time. “On time” means at the beginning of class on that specific due date. I will not accept e-mail attachments in lieu of your coming to class unless you arrange it with me well in advance, and have a University sanctioned excuse for missing class.

Academic Integrity

It is expected that all students have read and understood the University Student Conduct Code. If you have misplaced your copy, you can obtain one at <http://www.eiu.edu/~judicial/conductcode.pdf>. It is of utmost importance that you understand what is mean by cheating, facilitating academic dishonesty, fabrication, plagiarism, etc. It is also important for you to understand your rights should I, or any other instructor, accuse you of academic dishonesty. Every graded assignment, unless otherwise indicated, requires you to do original, independent, and creative work. In addition to copying someone else’s words or ideas, reusing your own work from other courses is considered academic dishonesty. At various times in the semester, you will be asked to summarize the materials of others – if you are using more than 3 words from that text, they need to be in quotation marks and include the corresponding page number. Violation of the Code will result in swift and

severe consequences – typically, failure for both the assignment and the course. All cases of academic dishonesty will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs where they will become part of your permanent academic record. Cheating is just not worth it.

Student Success Center

Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.

Disability Concerns

If you are a student with a documented disability in need of accommodation to fully participate in this class, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by Ninth Street Hall, Room 2006, or call 217-581-6583 to make an appointment. If you already have a letter from OSDS, please make sure that I am given a copy.

Academic Research

It is expected that you are capable of performing collegiate level academic research. This means utilizing an important resource on campus: the library. It may seem like a pain to visit the library, but not all of your research needs are available on your home computer. The only time you should be using Wikipedia or Google is to help you brainstorm – in other words, Googling a topic or doing a Wikipedia search should never constitute an end result of your research. This is especially the case for this class, which will spend much time examining the evidence provided by conspiracy theorists. You can't evaluate certain evidence as inadequate if you are using inadequate evidence for your own claims. Wikipedia and Google should never show up on your bibliography. In your presentations, phrases such as “according to Wikipedia.com...” and “as explained on Google.com...” should never escape from your mouth. Get to know your library databases. They are your friends.

Booth Library

Located in the center of campus, Booth Library is the best place to do research, find expert help, or study in a calm, distraction-free environment. In addition to the many print resources, Booth provides access to high quality e-books, journals and scholarship not freely available on the Web. Stop by the Reference Desk or go to <http://library.eiu.edu> to explore library resources. Get expert help with your research by contacting the Booth Library reference librarians. Visit, call 581-6072, or go to <http://booth.eiu.edu/ask> to connect with a librarian.

Assignments

Active Participation: Although I do not have an attendance policy, it is to your ultimate benefit to be present in class every day. Your in-class participation points are based on your contribution to class discussion, your regular class attendance, and your respectful behavior to your classmates and to me (e.g., giving others your full attention, not texting or playing around on-line during class, etc.). These points are given entirely at my discretion and are not subject to dispute at the end of the semester. **100 points**

Response Papers: You must complete four response papers during the course of the semester – *two before midterm, and two after*. These 2-page papers may be completed at your discretion, but they **MUST** be completed. Failure to complete all four papers will result in failure of the course even if you have enough points to pass without them. At the end of each week where readings are assigned, I will pose a series of questions about those readings. If you chose to write a response paper for that week, you will write an essay that responds to the questions, referring to the appropriate readings in your response, and turn it in the following Monday. **4 @ 50 points ea. = 200 points**

Logic Essay: 3-page analysis of the evidence and logic used in a conspiracy text to be selected by you. You will summarize the nature of the evidence presented, comment on its deficiencies and strengths. You will also analyze the logic used by the theorist(s) in making their argument with special attention to the logical fallacies we will discuss in class. This paper may be revised and regraded. **75 points**

Rhetorical Analysis: In this 3-5 page essay you will analyze the way a particular author OR filmmaker tries to persuade us that a conspiracy does or does not exist. You might, for example, examine the rhetorical strategies used in claiming a U.S. government cover-up in the September 11th attacks—or the rhetorical strategies used in replying to such a claim. This paper also includes a presentation, which will be scheduled for the last few weeks of the semester. The presentation is required in order for the analysis paper to be accepted. **150 points**

Reading Quizzes: There will be a reading quiz for nearly every day that a reading is assigned. These quizzes are designed to encourage you to keep up with your reading. Please do not contact me prior to class to ask if there will be a quiz in order to determine whether or not it's "worth it" to come to class. It's always worth it. **Total 150 points possible for quizzes, 10 points each.**

Exams: There will be a mid-term and a final exam in this class. The exams will be comprised of multiple choice, true/false, matching vocabulary, and short answer essays. **Mid-term: 100 points; final: 200 points**

Reading Schedule

Note: It is expected that you will read the text(s) BEFORE coming to class for the day, that you will take notes on your readings, and that you will bring the readings with you to class so we can discuss them fully. We may alter some of the readings as the semester progresses depending upon the needs of the class.

FOUNDATIONS

Reading/Assignment

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|-------|---|---|
| 1/7: | Course introduction | |
| 1/9: | What are conspiracy theories and why do we care? | Barkun Ch. 1; Uscinski & Parent Ch. 1 |
| 1/14: | Critical thinking: What is it? Why do we need it? | D2L: Makau & Marty Ch. 1 Uscinski & Parent Ch. 2 & 3 |
| 1/16: | Argumentation analysis and evaluation Case study: Fake news, Hillary Clinton and "Pizzagate" | D2L: Miller D2L: Robb |
| 1/21: | <i>MLK DAY, NO CLASS</i> | |
| 1/23: | Fallacies Problems of innumeracy | D2L: Inch, Warnick, & Endres D2L: Best |

UFO's AND ALIENS

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|-------|--|--------------------------|
| 1/28: | Aliens among us! | Barkun Ch. 5 |
| 1/30: | Case study: David Icke and the reptilian elite | Barkun Ch. 6 |
| 2/4: | "Trust no one": Popular culture and alien conspiracies <i>X-Files</i> | D2L: Kelley-Romano |
| 2/6: | Moon landing conspiracies: Flying in the face of visual evidence | D2L: Perlmutter & Dahman |

POLITICAL CONSPIRACIES

- | | | |
|-------|---|---|
| 2/11: | US and a history of conspiracies | D2L: Hofstadter; D2L: Olmstead Ch. 1 |
| 2/13: | Conspiracy theories and politics Case study: Breitbart | Uscinski & Parent Ch. 6 |
| 2/18: | Conspiracy theories and elections | Barkun Ch. 12 D2L: Hunter-Hart |
| 2/20: | Case study: George Soros and alt-right media | D2L: Achenbach D2L: Lavin |

2/25: Mid-term review

Logic essay due

2/27: Mid-term exam

3/4: Writing workshop

3/6: Snow day

Logic essay rewrite due

3/11-3/15 SPRING BREAK

SECRET SOCIETIES AND CABALS

3/19: History of secret society conspiracies

Barkun Ch. 3

3/21: Case study: The Illuminati

D2L: Griffin

3/25: Conspiracy theories go mainstream: Alex Jones

D2L: Hodai
D2L: Walker

3/27: Conspiracy theories and the “Deep State”

D2L: Savage

NATIONAL CRISIS CONSPIRACIES

4/1: Violence and conspiracy theories
Case study: Timothy McVeigh and Oklahoma City

Barkun Ch. 13

4/3: 9/11 Conspiracies

Barkun Ch 10
D2L: Olmstead ch. 7

4/8: Theories from the left: *Fahrenheit 9/11*

4/10: *Fahrenheit 9/11* discussion

4/15: PRESENTATIONS

4/17: PRESENTATIONS

4/22: PRESENTATIONS

4/24: PRESENTATIONS

Rhetorical Analysis paper

FINAL EXAM, THURSDAY, MAY 2, 2019, 8:00-10:00

Spotting Fake News Stories

- **Check the URL of the story:** abcnews.com is a legitimate news source; abcnews.com.co is not. Anything that ends with something other than .com, .org, or .gov, is likely to be a spoof.
- If someone important is quoted, **google the quote**. It can be tracked back to an event or a statement if it is legit.
- **Reverse search the questionable image** on google. Right click the image and copy the URL. Go to images.google.com and paste the URL to find out where it came from.

Use these tools:

Politics – factcheck.org and politifact.com

General scams – snopes.com

Email and social media hoaxes – truthorfiction.com and hoaxslayer.com

