

Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories in America

ASEM 2751-1 // Winter 2025 // Sturm 476

TTh 10:00 – 11:50 AM // Professor Philip Chen // philip.chen@du.edu

Office: Sturm Hall 474 // Office Hours: Wednesdays 9:30 AM – 11:30 AM

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Denver and the city of Denver reside within the traditional territories of Hinonoeino (Arapaho), Tsitsista (Cheyenne), and Nunt'zi (Ute). I recognize the descendant communities of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana, the Northern Arapaho Tribe of Wyoming, the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. I also acknowledge that over 40 different Indigenous nations continue to be in relation with the lands currently called Colorado.

Denver is home to many different citizens of Indigenous nations, and I recognize their enduring presence on this land by paying respects to their elders, both past and present. In class and throughout your time at the University of Denver, I ask that we consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and resettlement perpetrated against Indigenous nations and reflect upon and reconcile how the genocidal acts against Indigenous communities intersect with our learning, collaboration, and sharing of knowledge.

Course Description

This course focuses on the history and consequences of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the United States. Students read from multiple disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, and political science, to understand not only why misinformation and conspiracy theories persist, but also how they affect our health, democracy, and social lives. This course takes a pluralistic approach, with readings from academics as well as political practitioners, journalists, and others to underscore the many ways the misinformation and conspiracies are concerning for the United States.

Course Objectives

By the end of this quarter, you should be able to:

- Understand and describe a variety of psychological, historical, and sociological factors that influence the spread and endorsement of misinformation and conspiracy theories
- Analyze and explain the role of the media in spreading this information in the United States
- Evaluate the effects of misinformation and conspiracy theories on the beliefs and behaviors of the U.S. populace
- Develop a research idea and compose an independent research project

Structure of the Class

As an ASEM course, this class is devoted almost entirely to student-led discussion. You are expected to have read the readings carefully, taken detailed notes, and be prepared to discuss the findings in detail for the majority of the class period. Think of this as a culmination of the various academic and practical skills you have learned at DU. Your job in this class is to tie together the readings with what you have learned over your previous quarters here at the University of Denver.

Additionally, because a major component of this course is your final project, several class sessions are largely devoted to writing workshops. These workshops will focus on a variety of different topics and are designed to help you write a high-quality final project.

Office Hours and Help

I strive to make this course understandable and accessible for all students. If you have any questions about the content or structure of the course or about specific assignments, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am always happy to help if you come to me before assignments or exams are due. Please do not wait to ask for help until after the due date, come talk to me before if you are struggling.

Required Texts

This class will feature mostly academic books and articles. The required books are listed below and are available at the college bookstore or from Amazon or other places online. Readings are available on the class Canvas site at:

<https://canvas.du.edu/courses/194590>

There is one required book for the course:

Uscinski, Joseph. (2020). *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer*.

Grading

Grades are based on five different components, described in more detail below. 25% of your grade will come from reading quizzes posted on Canvas (1). An additional 5% of your grade will come from leading class discussion for approximately 5 minutes (2). 10% of your grade consists of attendance and participation in class (3) and an additional 10% consists of participation and assignments around an in-class debate (4). Finally, 50% of your grade will be based on a final project, developed and written over the course of the quarter, that is described in more detail below (5). For the final project, there are four writing components (possible topics, sources with descriptions, strategy draft, and paper conference), each of which is graded pass/no pass based on if you complete this on time. Each of these components is worth 2.5% of your final grade. The final draft is graded on the traditional A-F scale and constitutes the remaining 40% of your final grade.

Final Project	
Possible Topics and Justification	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Sources with Descriptions	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Strategy Draft	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Paper Conference	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Final Draft	40%
Reading Quizzes	25%
Debate Across the Curriculum	
Pre-Debate Brief	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Debate Participation	2.5% (Pass/No Pass)
Debate Debriefing	5%
Class Discussion Leader	5%
Participation and Attendance	10%

Final Project (50%) – Each student will create a recommendation for a media outlet to debunk a current conspiracy theory or piece of misinformation, relying on existing academic literature. In this project, you’ll briefly detail the history of the conspiracy or misinformation and the evidence against the belief. You’ll also lay out a recommendation for a strategy to correct this belief, justified with the academic literature on debunking incorrect beliefs. Feel free to be creative with the strategy, you can describe your strategy, write a short newspaper article, create a TikTok video, produce a series of Instagram posts, or whatever you believe will be most effective. Have fun with this!

In essence, think of this project as containing three components: a description of a piece of misinformation or a conspiracy theory (1), a strategy recommendation to correct this belief (2), and a justification for this strategy based on academic literature (3). I’ll provide a handout with more information on this assignment early in the quarter.

You’ll notice a number of components marked “Pass/No Pass.” These pieces of the final project can be thought of as low stakes requirements. If you turn these components in on time, you’ll receive full credit for that part of the class. If you turn these assignments in late, you will still receive feedback from me on them, but you will not receive credit towards your grade.

Reading Quizzes (25%) – Over the past couple years, I’ve come to dislike the concept of midterm and final exams because they place a premium on memorization and intense study rather than a cohesive synthesis of the material we read. In essence, finals and midterms seem to encourage students to memorize minutiae instead of substance.

However, the readings for this class were chosen with intention and I believe they are important for students to get the most out of the class. While I will sometimes lecture on the readings, the reading quizzes will focus both on things we cover in class as well as things that are only located in the readings.

While I would love to be able to simply ask “did you do the reading?” and grade you on this, it seems unrealistic. Approximately every other week, we will have a short, graded reading quiz posted on Canvas. You are welcome to use both class and reading notes and the readings to answer the questions. These quizzes will consist of a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and longer (2-3 paragraph) questions that ask you to synthesize the readings in some way. Reading quizzes are not cumulative.

Because you have a full week to complete the quiz, you cannot make up quizzes for unexcused absences. However, if you miss a quiz for a legitimate, excused absence, please reach out to me and we can discuss your options.

Debate Across the Curriculum (10%) – In weeks 5 and 6, the class will debate a specific prompt about the state of misinformation in America today. There are three components of this that will factor into your grade. First, each student will be responsible for writing a short brief in preparation for the debate. This will be graded pass/fail based on whether you completed the assignment and turned it in on time. The second component is your participation in the debate itself. NOTE: I will not be grading the quality of your arguments or anything like that, but simply your presence at the debate and participation in the debate. The final component is a short, written debriefing of the debate, which will follow the formal debriefing that occurs the class after the debate. I’ll provide more information about this during the quarter.

Discussion Leader (5%) – Each student will be responsible for leading class discussion on one day this quarter. You are not responsible for leading the entire day’s discussion. Instead, I will give you the chance to lead approximately 5 minutes of class. You should feel free to use this time to encourage discussion however you’d like. You can simply ask questions, or you may bring in additional short readings or activities. If you would like additional time beyond 5 minutes, that’s fine, just ask me so I can plan accordingly.

Most days will have two or more students scheduled to lead discussion for the same set of readings. You are welcome to lead discussion together or to lead separate discussions, the choice is yours. If you have a friend in the class who you would like to lead discussion with, feel free to sign up together for a specific date.

Participation and Attendance (10%) – The participation portion of your grade includes regular attendance in class, completion of in-class activities, participation in class discussions, and asking questions during class.

Half of this grade is based purely off of attendance. I will hand out a sheet for everyone to sign in at the start of class. If you are late to class, please check with me after class to make sure I’ve recorded your attendance for the day. There are 18 days in the quarter that we will meet as a class, and I will use the following scale to determine your attendance grade:

100%	0 absences	79%	4 absences
92%	1 absence	76%	5 absences
89%	2 absences	66%	6 absences
86%	3 absences	60%	7 or more absences

NOTE: This count does NOT include excused absences. If you miss class because of an approved college activity, illness, or prior arrangement with me, this will not count against your attendance grade. But you do need to let me know!

The other half of this grade is based on in-class participation. I'll advise you that I take the participation portion of the class seriously. I give very few A grades for participation. Thus, you shouldn't assume that simply attending class regularly is enough to get full participation. I grade participation holistically. If you are attentive in class, offer opinions and reactions to readings, and are engaged in discussion, you will do fine. But these are not simply "free" points for the class.

Grade Scale:

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	<60

Grading – On some assignments, you may receive a grade of B+/A- or something like that. This is just my shorthand way of assigning a number grade between two letter grades. Thus, an A grade is recorded in the grade book as 100 points while an A- grade is recorded as 92 points. If I think your work fell between these points, you may get an A-/A, which would be recorded as 96 points. So a A-/A is technically an A grade, but in the middle of the A range instead of the high end.

When calculating final grades, I always round up. So an 88.7% in the class becomes an 89% (B+), but an 89.1% would be rounded up to a 90% (A-).

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy - The emergence of generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT and DALL-E) has sparked interest among many students in our discipline. The use of these tools for brainstorming ideas, exploring possible responses to questions or problems, and creative engagement with the materials may be useful for you as you craft responses to class assignments. While there is no substitute for working directly with your instructor, the potential for generative AI tools to provide automatic feedback, assistive technology and language assistance is clearly developing. Please feel free to reach out to me well in advance of the due date of assignments for which you may be using generative AI tools and I will be happy to discuss what is acceptable.

In this course, students shall give credit to AI tools whenever used. When using AI tools on assignments, add an appendix showing (a) the entire exchange, highlighting the most relevant sections; (b) a description of precisely which AI tools were used (e.g. ChatGPT private subscription version or DALL-E free version), (c) an explanation of how the AI tools were used (e.g. to generate ideas, lines of argument, pieces of evidence, maps of the conceptual territory, illustrations of key concepts, etc.); (d) an account of why AI tools were used (e.g. to save time, to surmount writer's block, to stimulate thinking, to handle mounting stress, to clarify prose, to

translate text, to experiment for fun, etc.). Students shall not use AI tools during online or in-class examinations. Overall, AI tools should be used wisely and reflectively with an aim to deepen understanding of subject matter.

I will rely on the AI Checker feature in TurnItIn for this class. If a paper is flagged suggesting a significant portion of the paper was written using AI and the student has not properly cited their use of AI, I will contact the student. At this point, I will ask the student to explain the situation and provide evidence of their original writing and editing process, including things like a history of revisions, outlines, annotations, etc. Students who are unable to show evidence of their writing and editing process may be reported to the university for a violation of academic integrity.

It is a violation of university policy to misrepresent work that you submit or exchange with your instructor by characterizing it as your own, such as submitting responses to assignments that do not acknowledge the use of generative AI tools. Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions you may have about the use of generative AI tools before submitting any content that has been informed by these tools.

Course Schedule:

Beliefs in Misinformation and CTs

Tuesday, January 7	Class Introduction – No Readings
Thursday, January 9	Read: Sunstein & Vermeule 2009* Hofstadter 1965*
Tuesday, January 14	Read: Uscinski Ch. 1 & 2
Thursday, January 16	Writing Workshop – Ideas and Topics Writing Center and Career Center Coming to Class Read: Baglione Ch. 2*
Tuesday, January 21	Read: van der Linden 2013* Swami & Coles 2010* Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble Ch. 1*
Thursday, January 23	<i>DUE: Possible Topics and Justification</i> <i>Reading Quiz #1 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)</i> Read: Uscinski Ch. 3 & 4

Political Consequences

Tuesday, January 28	Read: Flynn et. al 2017* Uscinski Ch. 5 & 6
Thursday, January 30	Writing Workshop – Sources with Descriptions Read: Baglione Ch. 4*
Tuesday, February 4	Read: Miller et. al 2016* Shin et. al 2017* Lee 2016*
Thursday, February 6	<i>DUE: Sources with Descriptions</i> Debate Across the Curriculum (DAC) Preparation Read: Pasek et. al 2015* Blank & Shaw 2015* Additional Readings TBA

Health and Science Consequences

Tuesday, February 11	<i>DUE: Debate Across the Curriculum Brief</i> Debate Across the Curriculum (DAC) – No Readings
----------------------	---

Thursday, February 13 ***Reading Quiz #2 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)***
Debate Across the Curriculum (DAC) Debriefing
Read: Motta et. al 2018*
Fowler & Gollust 2015*

Tuesday, February 18 Read: Oliver & Wood 2014*
Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble Ch. 10*
Nyhan et. al 2014*

Media Consequences

Thursday, February 20 ***DUE: Debate Across the Curriculum Debriefing***
Read: Sunstein 2018*
Knight Foundation 2018*
Nyhan & Reifler 2012*

Tuesday, February 25 Read: Malka et. al 2009*
Chen & Luttig 2019*
Heflick 2017*
Braucher 2016*

Thursday, February 27 ***DUE: Strategy Draft***
DUE: Printed copies of all Final Project writing to class
Writing Workshop – Peer Review

What can we do?

Tuesday, March 4 Read: [Collins 2018](#)*
Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble Ch. 14*
Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble Ch. 16*

Thursday, March 6 NO CLASS (Paper Conferences)

Tuesday, March 11 ***Reading Quiz #3 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)***
NO CLASS (Paper Conferences)

Thursday, March 13 Final Class – No Readings

Tuesday, March 18 ***DUE: Final Project by 11:50 AM***

Attendance: Regular attendance is vital for your success in this course. I understand, however, that sometimes circumstances prevent you from coming to class. Missing one class will not destroy your grade; missing several will.

Late Work: Assignments are due by the end of the day they are listed as due, unless otherwise specified in the syllabus. Any assignments turned in after this time will be subject to the following late penalty: For each day late, I will deduct a third of a letter grade. So if an assignment is due Friday and you turn it in on Saturday, a B+ paper would receive a B. If you turn it in Sunday, it would be a B-, Monday would be a C. Assignments should be turned in using the Canvas system or handed in with a hard copy.

Grade Changes: Any appeals of a grade must be made at least **24 hours after** I hand back an assignment or exam. If you would like to appeal the grade you got on an assignment, prior to meeting with me you must submit a written statement (email is fine) detailing why you think your grade should be changed. I will then meet with you to discuss your statement and why you think your grade should be changed. If I make a mistake in totaling your grade for an exam or assignment (e.g. I added the points up incorrectly) then you do not need to write a statement or wait 24 hours. Just talk to me after class or during office hours and I'll double check and fix the mistake.

Contacting the Professor: I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course, readings, and assignments. In general, quick clarification questions can be handled over email. More in-depth questions are best discussed in person during my office hours, where we can have an actual conversation. If my office hours conflict with your class or work schedule, I am available by appointment as well. Please allow a full 24 hours for an email response. Often, my responses will be quicker than this, but do not send multiple emails about the same request until 24 hours have passed. I cannot guarantee that if you email me right before an assignment or exam that I will be able to answer your question in time, so please make sure and email me early if you have a time-specific question.

Extra Credit and Retakes: There is no scheduled extra credit in this course. You may not retake quizzes. There may be opportunities for extra credit, however.

Disability Services and Accommodations: Students with diverse learning styles, backgrounds, and needs are welcome in this course. Students who have disabilities (i.e., physical, medical, mental, emotional, and/or learning) and who want to request accommodations should contact the Disability Services Program (DSP); (303) 871-3241; 1999 E. Evans Ave.; 4th floor of Ruffatto Hall. Information is also available online at www.du.edu/dsp; see Handbook for Students with Disabilities