The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

-- H.P. Lovecraft

Many commentators on public discourse have declared that we live in a “post fact” era. The question facing us now with whether we can survive, as a democracy, in a “post-argument” era.

The work of this course will be to build an analytic framework for understanding conspiracy theories and their impact on public argument, as well as possible responses to them. This will require mastering the basics of argument analysis, considering relevant publics and counter-publics, and the role of mediated communication in allowing them to form and evolve.

We will be doing case studies of historical and contemporary conspiracies, including the Illuminati, the Salem witch trials, McCarthyism, Roswell, New World Order, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, 9-11 Truthers, the Clinton family and others, supplementing our study with fiction such as Arthur Miller’s The Crucible.

The study of these topics is not for the faint of heart. They live in dark and often offensive places in our public discourse and national psyche. These places, in the 2016 election season, have proven to be surprisingly influential, which makes it absolutely crucial that we understand them.