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 and feeds on the evergreen “paranoid style in American politics.”

The work of this course will be to build an analytic rhetorical 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.

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, since the 2016 election season, have proven to be surprisingly influential, which makes it absolutely crucial that we understand them examine them critically -- even when they are most disturbing.

However, in a populistic culture like ours, which seems to lack a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy, and in which it is possible to exploit the wildest currents of public sentiment for private purposes, it is at least conceivable that a highly organized, vocal, active, and well-financed minority could create a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible.”

— Richard Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists.

-- Hannah Arendt